

JUNIPER KERRY

BRIDES OF BESHTAST BOOK FOUR



AN
Impossible
BRIDE

A SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

An
Impossible
Bride

By Juniper Kerry

Book IV: Brides of Beshtast

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Chapter One - Jayla



I look out over the Jahull prairie, letting the wind whip through my hair. It's been more than five years since I left Earth behind and came to this damn planet, searching for my pair-bond. All I have to show for it is a bitter attitude, a propensity for cluster headaches, and a bunch of half-alien kids who call me Auntie.

...Ok, the kids aren't so bad. Three of them are running across the lawn in front of the HuManor right now, laughing and playing, their smiles reminding me of their mothers, even if the rest of their features read as alien.

"Jayla? Is the transport here yet?" asks a voice from my side. I glance over to see Ashley standing there, watching me with unabashed interest. She's become the de facto leader here, along with her almost-silent Xalke husband. I have used the HuManor as my sanctuary more times than I should; escaping the city doesn't really change my situation, but at least it's distracting. There's always something to do out here, and that helps. Especially now that I'm pretty sure there's something really wrong with me.

I shake my head. "Not yet," I say. "Should be here soon, though." I turn my attention back to the kids. They're rolling in the short, stiff grasses that grow so well out here, engaged in some kind of wrestling match.

"Think Sana and Kap will miss the prairie when they head back to the city next week?" Ashley asks. I can practically feel her eyes studying me. "I'm planning to pack them a bunch of cookies to take the edge off."

I shrug in response.

"Talkative today, huh?" she says, nudging me affectionately with her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I say vaguely. "Just... thinking."

"Hmm," Ashley replies, leaning against the railing. "About going back to Xenyle? You don't have to go, you know. You're always welcome here for as long as you want. You could even move back here permanently. We'd love to have you."

"I know," I say aloud. In my head, though, I think it would be a mistake to move here for good. As much as I love being out in this country house, it's heart-breaking to watch these kids play happily, to watch Ashley and Tal and all the other happy couples tromping around, while I'm still alone. It's too hard. At least in Xenyle, there are other people, even other species. Something other than families reminding me of how I've failed. Plus... I'm not sure what's wrong with me, but I'm starting to think it's serious. And if I'm right, I might not have that much longer before things get ugly.

The hum of a transport reaches our ears. The kids on the lawn stop their game and perk up their heads like little meerkats, running up onto the deck to get a better view of the approaching craft.

"They're coming for you, Auntie Jayla?" Sana asks. She looks a lot like her mother Clara, though I see plenty of Corm in there, as well.

"*Tak*, of course they are," her cousin Kap replies.

Sana and Kap are almost exactly the same age, born to human sisters Laurie and Clara only a few months apart. Laurie and Clara send their kids out here during school breaks so they can run and rough-house with Ashley's kids. There's something so comforting and also heart-breaking about it; like they've got this incredible network of family and friends while I'm hovering on the sidelines.

"How do *you* know they're here for Auntie Jayla?" Sana asks, folding her little arms across her chest.

"No one else is supposed to go back to the city today, are they, Auntie Jayla?" Kap asks.

"Like you know so much," his cousin grumbles back at him.

Ashley's youngest, Hallie, leans against my skirts and blinks up at me. "You don't have to go, do you, Auntie Jayla?"

My heart aches a bit as I smile down at her. "I do," I tell her. "But I'll come back soon."

The hovercraft appears, moving swiftly over the prairie. As the driver comes into view, I freeze. "Oh no," I murmur to myself. "No. Not him."

Ashley picks up on my whispering, and turns her sharp eyes to the hovercraft. "Is that Frey? Haven't seen him in a while, have we?"

“No,” I say through gritted teeth. “No, we haven’t.”

And that’s not by accident.

Ashley looks at me critically. “What happened between you two?” she asks quietly. “You used to be good friends, didn’t you? And then everything changed.”

“It did,” I say. “It all changed.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ashley asks.

“I don’t,” I reply. “Sorry but... I really don’t.”

Ashley nods. “That’s ok,” she says kindly. “As long as you’re ok.” She calls to the kids and chases them across the lawn, leaving me to myself.

Cursing under my breath, I push away from the porch railing and stride back into the house. I take the stairs two at a time and close myself in my room, pressing my forehead to the cool wood of the door. *Fuck*. Why does it have to be Frey of all people? Aren’t things hard enough as it is?

A headache hits me out of nowhere and I groan, closing my eyes. *Not now*, I order my broken brain. *Please just be cool*.

These headaches have been coming and going ever since I came to Beshtast, but in the last few months, they’ve become more and more frequent. Sometimes they pass in minutes, sometimes they last days and I’m stuck in bed with the lights off, trying like hell to sleep until they pass.

Mercifully, this one doesn’t stick around too long. The pain around my eye fades and my vision clears. I walk down the hall to the bathroom and splash water on my face. I glance at myself in the mirror, relieved to see that I don’t have a nosebleed.

Studying myself in the mirror, I try to imagine what Frey will see when I’m forced to face him. I’m ok-looking, I guess. I have dark brown eyes and long black hair that lies fairly straight when I treat it properly. My skin is a light-brown color, and I have freckles across my nose from my time out here in the prairie sunshine. I wouldn’t say I’m beautiful, but I don’t think I’m ugly enough to stop someone from bonding with me.

So what the fuck is stopping it? Why am I the only human left in this

place without a mate? Is it just that my body is so broken that it doesn't want to bother? The thought makes me nervous. I don't want to be sick; I don't want to be dying. I want what everyone else has: a life. Kids. A partner who looks at me with love and devotion.

"Jayla? Are you in there?" Ashley's voice calls softly. "Almost dinnertime."

"Ok," I tell her. "Thanks."

I hear her footsteps retreating, skipping down the stairs happily. Tal's low voice greets her, saying something that makes her giggle like a little kid. I shake my head as I smile to myself. I'm not so jealous that I can't be happy for my friends. And no one deserves happiness more than Ashley.

I square my shoulders and take one last look at my face. No nosebleeds, nothing in my teeth. Ready to go. No reason to hide. With a heavy sigh, I open the door and head down the stairs. When I'm halfway down, he appears, standing in the entryway of the house. His brilliant green eyes flash as they meet mine.

"Jayla," he says in his deep, rumbling voice.

My heart pounds at the sound of my name on his lips, but I shove the feeling away bitterly.

"Frey," I say with a sharp nod. I walk down the rest of the stairs and try to scoot around him, but he steps in my path. I look up at him, trying to stop the tingling that runs along my skin at his proximity.

He's tall and broad, like all the Xalkes, his skin a pale green color that sets off the brilliant dark green of his eyes. He wears a short beard now; that's new since last I saw him. It's the same brown as the cropped hair on the top of his head, short on the sides and a little longer on the top. A lock falls across his forehead, covering some of the dark blue tattoos that signify his status as a Denne warrior.

Frey's cheekbones are high and prominent, making him look as if he's always ready to smile. But his mouth is curved slightly downward, as if he's a little bit worried. I stop myself from letting my tongue dart out to lick my lips as I remember the feeling of kissing that mouth. I catch myself wondering if kissing him would feel any different with the beard, and chastise myself. *None of those lustful thoughts*, I tell myself primly. *He doesn't want you, and he never will.*

"I heard you needed a ride back into the city," he says, cocking his

head.

“So?” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

“So I came to bring you back,” Frey says.

“I didn’t ask you to do that,” I say, looking off to the side. I try to move past him again, but he leans over and puts his arm across my path, locking his large hand over the edge of the bannister.

“I know you did not ask me,” he says in a low, irritated voice. “You never ask me.”

“And we both know why,” I snap. “So whatever reason you have for coming here, whether it’s out of some kind of guilt or whatever weird shit keeps you trying to talk to me, just stop. You can’t change a damn thing.” I push on his arm, and he lets it drop from the bannister. I move forward fast, storming into the dining room with him on my heels.

“Ah, there you are!” Ashley says happily. “We’re excited to have you, Frey. It’s been too long.”

I calm my features to what I hope is a neutral expression and take a seat as far away from Frey as I can get. The smell of the food wafts over the table, and I breathe it in. Freshly baked bread with meats and veggies, and an array of fresh fruits are laid out on the table. As always, Ashley has taken her job as chef very seriously, and I appreciate it.

I grab a roll and sink my teeth into it, trying to focus on anything but the bright green eyes watching me across the table.

Chapter Two - Frey



I do not know why I am surprised to receive such a cold welcome from Jayla. It has been the same for the last five years. Ever since that night; the night so long ago when we gave in to temptation.

We had been close friends before it happened. Friends who felt attraction, maybe. But friends all the same. And then five years ago, she knocked on my door and changed everything.

My mind drifts back as I watch Jayla across the table. She is as beautiful now as she was then. I remember how it felt when her soft lips pressed against mine. How her breasts felt under my hands as I pushed my palm against them. The catch in her breath as I moved closer, thrusting my hips forward so she could feel my hard cock; my desire for her. And then the incredible feeling of pushing inside her, feeling her sweet cunt close around me...

I tighten my grip on my fork and lower my eyes to the food in front of me. Ashley's food is usually the best possible welcome anyone could want, but somehow it is difficult to enjoy it when I know Jayla is sitting across the table from me, hating me.

We had been close friends once; the best of friends, really. She leaned on me when she needed to lean on someone, especially as the females began to pair off with the Xalkes and we were among the few unbonded people left. We were important to each other... until we ruined it by fucking.

I have gone to great lengths to win back her friendship over the years, but she has been unreceptive. Yesterday, when I heard she was requesting a ride back to Xenyle, I decided to try one more time. I bribed Corm to let me pick her up. He was not sure it was a good idea—at this point, Jayla's contempt for me is far from secret, even if the reasons remain a mystery to everyone around us—but I managed to convince him to let me try one more time.

One more time before I give up, and stay out of her way forever. One more time before I let myself become a distant memory to her.

I do not like the idea. As much as it bothers me that she hates me so much, the idea that she might forget me bothers me more. Mechanically, I stab a piece of meat with my fork and shove it in my

mouth. The flavor explodes on my tongue, and I momentarily forget about my frustrations as I enjoy the salty delight.

“Do you like it, Frey?” Ashley asks eagerly.

“*Tak*, of course I like it,” I tell her. “There is no one who can cook as you can, Ashley.”

She gives me a brilliant smile, honest and open in a way I cannot comprehend. There is a growl from beside her, and Tal shifts closer, putting his arm around her shoulders in a possessive gesture. Ashley leans against him, whispering in his ear before giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Mom,” groans one of the kids from the far end of the table, “gross.”

Ashley smiles even brighter and laughs at her daughter. “Someday you might not think it’s so gross, Kata,” she says with a wink.

“Wanna bet?” Kata replies with a grumble reminiscent of her father’s.

I catch the twitch of a smile skating across Jayla’s face as she looks at the child affectionately. Her eyes wander over the other kids, and I see the longing there. It makes my chest ache to see her so saddened. She confided in me many times about her wish for children. It was her desire for a family that made her volunteer for the program in the first place. ‘Not just a man to love me,’ she said. ‘A family.’

Why does she come here, I wonder, when it hurts her so? The HuManor is always full of loud and happy families, eating and running and squabbling with each other. For those of us who have yet to find our pair-bond, it has always been a difficult place to visit.

But Jayla spends more time here than she does in the city. Why? What calls her here? There are no unattached males that I am aware of.

Of course, the Caane tribe does not live far away. According to our Caane liaison, Larric, there are many males there, unattached and looking for mates. They have been encouraged to connect with the HuManor, to trade and to build relationships with this place. In the future, more single human females may come out here just to meet the Caane.

The thought of Jayla bonding with one of them, or with anyone, makes me clench my jaw so hard it hurts. Which is unfair of me, I know that. If I will not take her for myself, I cannot stop her from taking another partner. But that does not mean I like it. I want her to

be close to me again, as we were. I want her for my friend and my ally, and she will be neither if she bonds with someone. I know I am a selfish bastard for thinking it, but I cannot help myself.

“Frey?” Ashley’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

I look up to find that she is looking at me, as are all the others at the table.

“Tak?” I ask. “I am sorry... what did you ask?”

Ashley smiles kindly. “I wanted to know what time you planned to leave tomorrow.”

“Ah. There is an important discussion about the Sarta situation in a few days with the members of the Council. My presence has been requested, so I want to get back before then, if I can. We will leave as the sun rises, if it is amenable to Mistress Jayla,” I say, my eyes darting over to hers.

Jayla meets my gaze head-on. “It is,” she says, before looking away again.

“What’s going on with the Sarta?” Ashley asks. “Last I heard, you were still talking to them.”

I grunt. “Talking to them would be optimistic. We have spent years trying to get them to talk to us about their occupation of Earth. They have been very unresponsive. We are reaching a critical point. I believe that the Council has sent them an ultimatum. If there is no response...” I trail off, unsure how to finish my own thought.

“Do you think there might be a war?” Ashley asks, her eyes widening.

“I hope not,” I tell her honestly. “But it is difficult to predict what the Sarta will do. And their treatment of humans and their planet cannot be tolerated any longer. They have stripped it of all its resources. The place was bad enough a few years ago.” I shake my head. “Now it is almost unrecognizable.”

“Have you been there?” one of the children asks, his eyes wide. “Earth?”

“Several times now,” I tell him. The last of which was just a few months ago. Compared to my first visit five years ago, the difference is chilling. The world is broken in a way that I cannot put into words; brown and dusty, the air stinking with chemicals and the sky clouded

with pollution. Most of the water is poisoned. The animals and people have been removed from the planet and settled on colonies, or they have died. It will take generations to undo the damage the Sarta have caused.

My eyes dart to Jayla. Her eyes are filled with sadness. Although she has not asked me about it, I know she has followed the destruction of her planet over the years. My chest tightens, and I wish I could think of something comforting to say. Of course, there is nothing. What would comfort me if Beshtast were ruined as Earth has been? No words could make an impact on that kind of pain.

“Well. I’m sorry you couldn’t stay longer,” Ashley says with genuine regret in her voice. She glances over at Jayla. “Maybe you’ll come back soon?” she asks hopefully.

Jayla offers her a small comforting smile. “I’m sure I will,” she says. “You know I can never stay away from here for too long.”

I glance at her, and find she is looking back at me. My heartbeat quickens for a moment, first with surprise and a small delight that she would be watching me, and then with panic and concern as I notice the small line of red trickling down her lip. “Jayla,” I say. “There is something under your nose.”

Jayla’s eyebrows rise in surprise and she reaches up and touches the bottom of her nose. She pulls her fingers away red with blood. I growl and jump to my feet, eating up the floor as I make my way around the table to her side. I grab hold of her hand and lift it, inspecting the bright red that streaks her skin.

“It’s nothing,” she says, putting her napkin against her nose quickly. “Just a nosebleed. If you’ll excuse me...” She shakes my hand off and rises from the table. She practically runs out of the room.

“Third one since she’s been here,” Tal says, his eyes on mine. “Not normal.”

“Tal,” Ashley says in a chastising voice. “It’s not our business.”

“It is Frey’s business if he is tasked with her protection, *colarche*,” Tal says, giving Ashley an affectionate look.

This is more words than I have ever heard Tal speak together in a row, which only adds to my concern. He would not say anything if this were not serious.

“Tal is right,” I say to Ashley. “I need to know if she has a health issue, since we will be travelling together.”

“Well,” Ashley says, pressing her lips together. “I guess that’s true.” Her soft eyes turn to mine. “I’ve been worried. She doesn’t seem like herself. A lot of headaches, plus the nosebleeds... Tal’s right that neither of those things are normal for humans. Not to the degree she’s having them. And she’s been sleeping more than she usually does when she’s here. It’s all pretty concerning.”

Panic buzzes in my veins. “Thank you for telling me,” I say through the lump in my throat. “I will go check on her.”

Ashley nods. “Just... be gentle with her, Frey,” she says. “I tried to talk to her about it, but she wasn’t ready to discuss it with me. And we all know your relationship isn’t the easiest.”

I wish I could deny it, but of course I cannot. I nod tightly and turn on my heel, my senses tuned to Jayla. I hear a small thump in the downstairs bathroom. A quiet curse whispers through the air. I walk to the door and knock gently. I am surprised when it opens a crack and Jayla says, “Come in.”

I step into the room and close the door behind me.

“Oh,” Jayla says, looking at me in confusion, a cloth held to her nose. I can see the redness of the blood through the fabric. “I thought you would be Ashley.”

She moves to open the door again, as if to shoo me out, but I step forward, blocking her path. “Tal says this is not your first time bleeding this way.”

“It’s called a nosebleed,” she says dismissively. “It’s really nothing. You can go. I’ll be out in a minute, I just need to wait until it passes.” When I make no move to leave, she sighs and sits down on the closed toilet. She closes her eyes and leans forward, holding the bloody cloth to her nose.

I am surprised that she has given in to my presence so easily. In fact, it alarms me. The Jayla I know would go out of her way to push me out. She would expend any amount of energy necessary to stop me from being close by. Concern and dread pounding in my veins, I lean against the closed door, studying her.

“What is wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she says quickly. Then she looks at me for a moment, as if waiting for me to say something. When I just stare back at her, she gives in. “...At least, as far as I know it’s nothing. Probably some kind of pollen or something.”

“Pollen from plants? But you have never been bothered by such things before.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Frey,” she says sharply. “I don’t have any answers either. That’s why...” she trails off.

“That is why what?” I prompt her forcefully.

“That’s why I’m going to Julia when I get back to Xenyle,” she says. “I’m not an idiot. I’m going to get it checked out.”

This is good news, of course, but it also worries me. If she has made a decision to see a doctor, it means she, too, is concerned. Which means things are probably far worse than she is letting on.

“How long has this been happening?” I ask.

Jayla purses her lips and opens her eyes to study me. “What do you care?” she asks. The bleeding seems to have stopped, and she rises from the toilet and walks to the sink. She runs the water from the faucet and leans forward to splash water on her face.

“I care, Jayla,” I growl, stepping closer to her. “I care very much.”

As she pats her face dry, Jayla gives me a sad look in the mirror. She shakes her head. “You don’t,” she says. “Not really.”

She slips around me and opens the door to the bathroom before I can stop her. As it slams closed, leaving me alone in the bathroom, I have to stop myself from punching the wall.

Five years. It has been five years since I gave in to temptation and ruined any chance I had of being Jayla’s friend. Five years of constant torture, whether together or apart. And it seems there is still no end in sight.

Chapter Three - Jayla



I barely sleep. I toss and turn, knowing Frey is so close by. I hate it when he's here; his presence is just another reminder of how alone I am. I'm reminded of everything I've wanted from him, everything I've hoped for, and every time he's rejected me. Because it's happened way more than once.

He's made it very clear that he doesn't want to be with me, but I can't stop reliving the humiliation of throwing myself at him, desperately wanting him, only to have him shake his head and back away.

I give up on sleep and get out of bed, walking to the window and staring out at the prairie night. My mind keeps drifting, and finally, I let it go, taking me back to a night five years ago that I will never forget.

Clara had just arrived on Beshtast, mated to Corm. She was just the latest in a long stretch of partnerships between Xalkes and humans. Every time someone came back with a partner, I was happy for them. Of course I was. But something inside me died a little more with each pair-bond.

At the time, only a few of us were left living on our own, unbonded. We had recently moved into Nia and Jaske's old home, a big, open place near the docks that we nicknamed the warehouse.

I remember I was pacing my room that night, feeling lost. It felt like everyone was leaving me behind... because that's exactly what was happening. I had to do something to change it. Something to make the bond stick with the only person I felt anything for. Time and time again, Frey had made it clear that he didn't feel the bond between us.

He said it so often that I wondered if maybe I wasn't really feeling it either. Maybe what I felt was just attraction compounded with loneliness. He and I were friends; we talked, told each other things about our lives. Maybe we just liked each other, like Frey always said. Maybe that's all there was.

But that night, it seemed more clear than ever that Frey was the only one for me. I remember thinking that if I didn't do something right then, I would be alone forever. He would find someone else and leave me just like the others did. I needed to make him see me the way I

saw him.

I decided that it was time to be bold.

I brushed my teeth and combed my hair, and then I stepped out into the hall barefoot. I was wearing a nightgown similar to this one, thin fabric that billowed around my body all the way to my ankles. I walked across the atrium. It was about this time of year, early spring, and the hovering bioluminescent flowers were glowing in the night. It felt as if they were lighting the way, just for me.

I knocked on Frey's door, and he opened it instantly, as if he, too, had been pacing his room. His eyes flared as soon as he saw me. His gaze raked over my body, and I shivered. Without a word, he opened the door wider, letting me step inside. As the door closed behind me, I felt my heart thudding in my chest. The tug there, pulling me toward him, felt overpowering. I stepped back and leaned against the wall, licking my lips.

Without a word, he stepped closer, his eyes watching me as if looking for any sign of distrust or worry. He pressed the palms of his hands against the wall on either side of me, and bent close. He inhaled sharply, as if smelling me.

"Jayla," he groaned as he released his breath.

My name on his lips sent a wave of pleasure through my body. I reached up and cupped my hands on his jaw, drawing him closer. His mouth touched mine, and my heart clenched at the feeling. It felt so *right*. So completely and utterly right.

Frey groaned, his hands sliding around me as he pushed me into the wall. He ground his cock against me as his tongue slid into my mouth, claiming me. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my tongue against his. He growled low in his throat and dropped his hands to my ass.

Before I knew it, he was grabbing my thighs and wrapping them around him, lifting me up and pressing me back against the wall. I could feel how hard he was for me. How much he wanted me. I clung to him, breathing in his scent and smiling to myself. I remember thinking that everything would be ok if he would just sink into me, touch me, make me whole.

As if he knew what I was thinking, he fisted a hand on my nightgown and pulled the fabric up. His hand came between us and touched me,

running through my folds. I let my head fall back, my eyes closed.

“So fucking wet,” he ground out against my ear.

I shivered as his hand found my clit and circled it, slowly at first, and then faster. My breath hitched and I pressed against him, finding a rhythm with his hand. I gasped his name, and begged for him to take me.

Remembering it now, my hands clench into tight balls. I begged him. I fucking *begged* him to take me. I stare out at the prairie night and try to forget the feeling of his cock notched at my entrance. The incredible sensation of him slowly pushing into me, inch by inch, until he was buried to the hilt. The way he pressed his forehead to mine. The room was silent except for the sounds of our breathing.

I’m ashamed of myself for being wet at the memory of it. I’m ashamed of myself because I’m tempted to run my hand down to my breasts, and lower. It wouldn’t be the first time I touched myself to the thought of him and that night we were together.

Once he was all the way inside me, Frey stayed still for long moments. He whispered my name. Told me how beautiful I was. How often he had dreamed of this. I’ve never felt so complete as I did that night. I’ve never felt so sure that something was real.

And then he started to move. He flexed his hips as he gripped my ass in his hands, pushing me against the wall with his thrusts. He was gentle at first, moving slowly and carefully, but my fingernails bit into his shoulders and he moved faster. Before long we were slamming our bodies together, fucking hard and fast, hungry for each other.

We moved together perfectly. I remember tears forming in my eyes as we reached release together, it was so beautiful. Frey shuddered as he came inside me, my name on his lips.

And then, as he pulled out of me, my body still filled with his seed, I smiled up at him. He lowered me to the floor gently, his hands still tender and careful as he touched me, and I let out a little laugh of happiness. Everything felt like it was finally happening. Maybe this was what we had needed all along; maybe I had just needed to push him a little bit harder.

And then I lifted my eyes to his, and saw that he was giving me that grim, impossibly tortured look.

“We should not have done that,” he said, still out of breath from

fucking me.

I was shocked. I shook my head, confused. What could he mean, we shouldn't have done that? It had been incredible. The connection I felt, it couldn't be wrong. But when I shook my head, when I told him I thought we should give it a try, he just looked at me, resigned. He told me that the pair-bond was more than this. More than just lust and friendship. As much as he liked me, the pair-bond was a deeper connection; something he should be able to feel tugging at his body and mind.

"Being with you should be an all-consuming force," he said in a placating, calm voice, as if his words weren't cutting through me like glass. "It should be impossible to concentrate on anything else. I should feel it right here," he pointed to his own chest, and then shook his head. "That's what the others say the pair-bond is like."

And he just didn't feel that for me.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself, back in the present. My stomach clenches as I relive the horror of that moment. Even now, my body is practically vibrating with desire and pain. This is why it's better for me to avoid Frey. Even having him nearby is a reminder of everything I can't have with him. Everything he won't give me. Because feeling attraction, even affection, will never be enough for him.

Thank God I didn't get pregnant that night. Thank God neither of us had to experience the horror of being forced to raise a child together, even if something inside of me still aches treacherously at the idea of carrying his baby.

I clench my jaw angrily at my body's betrayal. *He doesn't want me*, I remind myself harshly. He never did. I was just a convenient fuck, and despite our friendship, when he had a chance to find release inside of me, he took it, even though he knew it would mean the end of what we had.

He didn't even hold me when we were done. Just reminded me that he didn't care about me "like that" and sent me back to my room, wounded and distraught.

Over the last few years, I've let my hurt turn to hate and resentment; both are far more comforting than tears and pain. I've made it clear in person and in letters that I don't want to be near him anymore, and for the most part, he's respected that.

So what the actual fuck is he doing here?

Chapter Four - Frey



By the time the sun rises, I am agitated. I spent most of the night pacing my room, replaying Jayla's nosebleed in my mind. I have never seen another human with this condition. Although she tried to pretend she was fine, I could tell she was concerned about it.

I grit my teeth, trying to keep control of myself. She is seeing a doctor; there is nothing more that anyone can do for her until we have more information. But I dislike the feeling that something might be wrong; something outside of my control.

We may not be bonded, but we are still friends. And since she does not have a husband yet, I am the Xalke with the closest connection to her. I will stay by her side through this process. I will make sure she is taken care of. If nothing else, it is a way I can make amends for the way I treated her all those years ago.

I dress and go down to breakfast, my stomach growling at the incredible food selection laid out on the table. Ashley has always had a reputation for feeding people well, but it seems as if she has outdone herself this time.

Jayla is already sitting at the table. She is wearing the blue trousers the humans call 'jeans' and a blue shirt with small flowers on it. Her eyes meet mine for an instant and then skitter away. I choose a seat far away from hers. Not that it would matter if I sat right beside her; she will ignore me either way. Perhaps I deserve it, but it does not improve my mood to know she would rather I were not here.

"Feeling all right today, Jayla?" Ashley asks.

"Sure," she says in a too-light tone. "Why do you ask?"

"Just thought I heard you up in the middle of the night," Ashley says with a shrug. "Did you have another headache?"

My gaze shoots over to Jayla in alarm.

But Jayla shrugs it off lightly. "No," she says. "Just couldn't sleep. Sad to leave all this bounty behind, most likely."

She winks at Ashley, who gives her a broad grin. "Well, you know

you're always welcome to come back," Ashley says.

"*Tak*," Tal says. "Please return whenever you like."

The rest of the table stares at Tal in shock. Tal is not usually one to offer hospitality. He tolerates the visitors at the HuManor, usually resisting any attempt to get to know them. His offer for Jayla to return is unprecedented.

Ashley reaches over and takes his hand, gazing at him affectionately. "Tal likes you," she says to Jayla. "He told me last night that he thinks the children are happiest when Auntie Jayla is here."

Jayla looks back and forth between Ashley and Tal, stunned. Then she sits back and blinks back tears. "I... um... thanks, Tal. That means a lot to me. I'll be back soon, I promise."

Tal grunts and gets to his feet, striding out of the room as if he has somewhere to be. Ashley watches him go with love in her eyes.

"Too much?" Jayla says to Ashley in a low voice.

"Yeah, but not because of you," Ashley says. "He's just... getting used to having people around. He doesn't like losing someone he sees as family."

"He's not losing me," Jayla replies. "Really he's not."

"I know," Ashley says with a smile. "And he knows it too, deep down. But he's worried about you. So am I."

Jayla nods, biting her bottom lip. "The truth is, I'm worried too," she says in a low voice. Then, clearing her throat, she rises to her feet. "We should get a move on," she says, turning to face me. "Whenever you're ready."

"I can be ready in ten minutes," I reply.

She nods, letting her eyes drop back to the table. "You already packed us a shitload of food to take with us, didn't you?" she says to Ashley.

Her friend chuckles. "You know me too well."

"Are there scones in there?" Jayla asks.

"There will be by the time you leave," Ashley replies.

Jayla sighs and runs her hands over her face. "I love you, girl."

Ashley stands and wraps Jayla in a hug. "Same," she says, kissing her cheek.

I try not to worry about the expression on Ashley's face. She is usually so light and happy, but when Jayla is not looking, there is pain and worry in her eyes.

We depart only a little while later. Our hovercraft is prepped by the time we step off the porch. Tal lugs a giant basket of food out of the house and places it behind the seats on the hovercraft. He grunts when Jayla thanks him, muttering something about Ashley being the one who did all the work. Jayla throws her arms around his neck and pulls him into a hug, which he returns in surprise. I resist the urge to pull them apart.

A group of children is crowded around it; some of them Ashley and Tal's, some of them local Caane children who move in and out of the HuManor by some elaborate system I know little about.

As I start the engine, they step back, and then chase us across the fields, waving and calling after us. Jayla smiles and waves back until they cannot see us any longer. Then her smile drops away, and she slumps down in a chair at my side.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"Yup," Jayla says tightly. "How long until we get back, do you think?"

"You know as well as I do that it will take two days," I tell her gruffly, still reliving her hug with Tal.

Jayla snorts. "Some of the newer hovercrafts can do it in one," she points out. "I didn't know how new this one was."

I glance at the rusted bolts on the front of the craft, but do not say anything. If she was hopeful she would not have to spend the night in the fields with me, I am not going to argue with her. After all, it would be better for both of us if we could avoid too much close proximity.

Unfortunately for both of us, this is not a new craft, and as the day wanes, we are still far from Xenyle. I slow the craft to a stop near a small outcropping of trees. We need to make camp. I have brought two tents with us. I hold out the tent bag to Jayla silently, and she grabs one without a word. We start to set them up on opposite sides of

the craft.

A ripple of thunder sounds in the distance as we begin to construct the tents. A strong wind whips up around us. I glance over at Jayla to see her hair blowing wildly.

I curse under my breath, moving faster through the motions of building the tent. The last thing I want to do is try to erect it in the midst of a rainstorm. I glance over my shoulder to check on Jayla a few times, and find that she is progressing in her construction without issue. Before long, her tent is up, and she is nowhere to be seen. Good. She is already safe in her shelter.

I turn my back and keep working, feeding the tent pole through the center of the fabric as fast as I can. I get my tent up, and duck inside. I tug on a cord, and a soft mattress breaks free of the tent wall, self-inflating across the tent floor. I walk back outside and grab my bags from the craft, throwing them into the tent on top of the bed. Jayla's bags are already gone, I assume into her own tent. My eyes flick to her little structure, bending slightly in the strong winds. I wonder if she is warm enough.

Just then, a wild gust blows across the prairie. I hear a loud CRACK overhead. I look up just in time to see a large branch fall from the tree above us. It lands hard on top of Jayla's tent, crushing it flat.

Chapter Five - Jayla



“JAYLA!” Frey screams. I spin around from where I have been standing, watching the wind blow across the open prairie. Frey is racing around the side of the hovercraft toward my tent, which seems to be flattened underneath a giant tree branch.

I step closer, calling his name, but the wind whips the sound away. I walk closer, and see that Frey has rolled the branch away, and is now frantically searching the tent for me, calling my name over and over again. He sounds desperate. Panicked. My heart pounds as I get closer. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he really cared if I lived or died.

I sigh inwardly. Of course he cares. All the Xalke warriors care about us human women. They don’t want us to be injured or killed, especially on their watch. It doesn’t mean anything about the relationship between me and Frey.

I reach the warrior and lay my hand on his shoulder. He spins around in surprise, his eyes wide with anxiety. I watch as his brain finally registers that I’m standing in front of him, uninjured. With a strangled sound, he reaches for me and pulls me tight against him. I lean into him, unable to help myself. He’s so warm and big, his muscles rippling under his skin as he holds me.

“Fuck, Jayla,” he says in an uneven voice. “I thought... I thought...”

“I was just over there under the trees,” I say gently. “Not in the tent.”

“If you had been...” He backs away just enough to look down at me. His hands come up to the sides of my face. “But you are all right?”

I nod. “I’m fine,” I tell him.

He stares at me for another moment and then dips his head, touching his mouth to my own. At first, his lips are soft, gentle. But as soon as I move against him, he groans. His tongue slides between my lips. His hand grabs my neck possessively, tilting my head to the side so he can slant his mouth over mine in a desperate way that makes me feel cherished and desired all at once. I respond eagerly, unable to help myself. My tongue wars with his, my lips tingling with the incredible feeling of kissing him.

His hands are everywhere, moving over me, touching me anywhere he can. My breath is coming in fast little bursts, and I can feel his cock hardening against my belly.

And then the rain starts to fall. There are no small droplets to warn us that it might be starting. Instead, the drops fall from the sky in sheet after sheet of freezing, luminescent water. Frey and I jump apart. He lets out a curse and grabs hold of my hand, running us both around the hovercraft to the safety of his tent.

He holds the flap open and lets me crawl inside first. I slip off my boots just within the entrance and crawl deeper into the tent, trying not to get the bed and other surfaces wet. Frey climbs inside and closes the tent by pinching the fabric together. It seals instantly, with us safe and out of the storm.

As soon as we're inside, the awkwardness settles over both of us. I try to explain the situation away in my own head; he thought I had been killed or seriously hurt. That's all that kiss was about. But I'm embarrassed by my own strong reaction. I should have pushed him away. He's made himself more than clear when it comes to things between us. I don't need to be falling into his arms any time he feels like sticking his tongue in my mouth. It will only make me seem more desperate and sad. ... It will only make me *feel* more desperate and sad.

We stare at each other in silence for a little while, the air around us thick and tense. Then I start to shiver. I'm obviously soaked, and the temperature has dropped significantly since the storm started. Frey curses and turns back to the entrance. I grab his arm without thinking. "Where are you going?" I ask.

"To get your bags," he says. "You cannot stay in those wet clothes all night."

"My bags were in the tent," I say, still trembling with cold. "They're probably trapped under the branch."

"I will find them," Frey says. Then he hesitates. "Unless you would... rather wear something of mine?"

I bite my lip. The part of me that wants Frey would jump at the chance to be snuggled in his clothes. The idea of his scent surrounding me, possessing me, sounds awfully comforting. But the logical, emotionally aware part of me that knows he will just continue to reject me warns that this is a bad idea. Still, I don't want him to go

back out in this storm, so I nod my head. “That’ll work,” I say.

Frey nods and reaches into his bag, pulling out a soft blue shirt with buttons up the front. I take it from him and move to the other side of the tent. My dress is sticking to my skin, so I have to practically peel it off. My bra is soaked too, so I undo it and drop it next to my wet dress. I slip the shirt on over my head and button it up, gathering my hair to the side so I don’t soak the collar too much.

When I turn around, Frey is facing away from me. Apparently he thought it was a good idea to change at the same time I was changing. His back is naked, and he seems to be breathing hard as he pulls a long tunic over his head. He glances over his shoulder at me, and his eyes flare as he notices I’m watching him.

“Better?” he asks in a raspy voice.

I nod. “Thanks.”

I’m still shivering, though. A strong wind blows outside, and I hug myself, trying to get warm. Frey is watching me, as if trying to figure out what to do. I glance down at the bed and realize that we’re going to have to share it.

I would have been better off out in the storm.

Chapter Six - Frey



I am trying so hard not to look at Jayla, but she is shivering, and the instinct deep inside me is screaming that she needs me to warm her. I glance in her direction just as she reaches behind her back and takes off her bra. Her naked skin is smooth and delicate. My hands itch to run up that back. To push her face-down on the mattress and take her from behind...

I tear my gaze away and return to the task of changing my own clothes, viciously reminding myself of the harm I could cause by touching her.

When I turn around again, she is staring down at the bed, biting her lip.

"We should go to sleep," I say, my voice coming out raspy and gruff.

She nods without looking at me, and slips her feet under the covers. I crawl to the other side and get into the bed next to her, my arm grazing hers despite my best efforts. I hear the smallest catch in her breath, and my cock goes hard. Gritting my teeth, I move over as best I can, but the bed isn't big enough for us to avoid touching. We lie there, both of us staring up at the ceiling, listening to the wind.

Jayla shivers again.

"Are you still cold?" I ask.

"No," she says quickly.

"I can hear your teeth clattering together," I say.

She snorts. "It's called 'chattering.'"

"It is a sign of cold, is it not?" I ask.

"Sure," Jayla says. "Or fear. Don't Xalkes do that when they're cold?"

"We do not get cold as easily as humans," I reply.

She does not respond to that. Instead she turns her back to me and pulls her knees up to her chest, trying to find warmth in her own body. I clench my jaw, trying to resist the urge to pull her close. It will

not do either of us any good to touch each other right now.

I stay on my side and eventually fall into an uneasy slumber.

I wake up to the bed shaking. I turn over to find Jayla's whole body trembling. She is asleep, it seems, because she does not respond when I whisper her name. This time, I cannot ignore her. I shift closer and pull her against my chest. She rolls over instantly and cuddles against me, making little whimpering noises that hit me directly in the heart. It might be in my head, but I swear she whispers my name as she snuggles closer. I wrap my arms around her and run my hands up and down her back.

Her scent, light and floral, invades my nostrils as she settles her head in the curve of my shoulder. "Frey," she whispers. This time, there is no chance she did not say it. My heart seizes at the sound, and I tighten my grip on her. Jayla's eyes are closed, her body relaxed. "I missed you," she murmurs. "You've been gone so long. I think of you all the time. You feel so good."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to ignore the surge of happiness that floods my body at her words. She would never admit that she missed me when awake. She would never sacrifice that kind of dignity after the many times I have rejected her and set her aside. And since she is asleep, there is no need for me to reply. No need for me to be honest or noble. I can just hold her. Just breathe in her scent and pretend things are as they were.

Her hand curves over my shoulder. Even though her skin is cold, my body heats under her touch. Her nails scrape against me and I groan. Things are definitely not as they were.

I should not enjoy the fact that she needs me, but I do. My heat surrounds her, comforting and warming her, and I fall asleep much happier than I was before.

I awaken later in the night to the feeling of her breath on my neck. She runs small kisses up and down my skin. I open my eyes and find that hers are closed. She is still asleep. I bite back a groan as her tongue slides out of her mouth and touches my collarbone, tasting me. My cock strains against the confines of my trousers, aching to bury itself inside her. I cannot take much more of this without flipping her on her back and taking her hard.

Deep inside my chest, a voice whispers that I can take her; that she already hates me, and there is no reason to deny myself.

Horried that such a thought could come from my mind, I grasp Jayla's hands to stop their movements. "Jayla," I say tightly. "Jayla, wake up."

Jayla's eyes open and she gasps when she realizes that she is in my arms. She struggles to move away from me, but I tighten my hold. "You are freezing," I tell her. "You need me to warm you."

She blinks up at me as if confused by my words. Humans do not see very well in the dark, so I doubt she can see my face, but I can see hers clearly. Her tongue slides out of her mouth to lick her lips as she relaxes ever so slightly in my embrace. My chest aches in a satisfying sort of way, enjoying the feeling of her body against mine.

"Don't get any ideas," she says in a quiet voice.

I chuckle despite myself and hold her tighter. We lie there like that, listening to the wind howl outside. My body is reacting to her presence, my cock throbbing painfully, and I push my hips back away from her so she cannot feel it jutting against her.

Even if I did think it was a good idea to have sex right now, I would not want to give up the comfort of this moment. After so many terrible interactions with Jayla these past few years, this is the first time in a long time that it feels as if there is peace between us. Even if that peace does not quiet the desires that burn deep inside me.

The truce only lasts until daybreak. As soon as light starts to filter through the tent, Jayla moves away from me and gets to her feet. She checks her clothes and clucks her tongue as she finds them (predictably) still wet. She opens the tent and steps outside. She leaves the tent open as she walks barefoot through the prairie grasses. I cannot help but watch her.

My shirt falls to her thighs, and my gaze drops to her long, toned legs. I cannot help but imagine them curved around my hips as I thrust into her. I remember the feeling of them wrapped around me that one night. The memory haunts me when she is not present. Now, with her right in front of me, it becomes painful.

Jayla disappears around the other side of the hovercraft. I wait a moment, thinking she might be seeing to her body's needs, but when she does not return, I leave the tent to investigate. Jayla is staring at her flattened tent, muttering to herself as she tries to find a way to

move the giant branch that sits on top of it.

“Do you need help?” I ask.

Jayla’s head snaps up. She hesitates for a moment and then nods.

“Thanks,” she says. “I could use some clean clothes for today.”

I grunt and lift the branch off the tent, throwing it into the grasses out of the way. Jayla raises an eyebrow.

“What?” I ask.

“Um, I just... I couldn’t move that thing at all,” she says. “I’m impressed.”

My chest puffs up slightly at her praise, but she does not wait for my response before dropping to her knees in the grass and digging through the broken tent. She finds her bag and unzips it, sighing in relief as she feels the clothing inside. “Dry,” she says without looking up at me. She grabs the bag and gets to her feet. Her eyes flick to mine for a moment before she looks away. “I’m going to go over there on the other side of the trees to change,” she says.

“*Tak*,” I reply.

“So, um... don’t leave without me, ok?” she says.

I know she is trying to joke with me, but I do not like the idea that she might have the slightest worry of such a thing happening. “I will not leave without you,” I tell her.

She nods and murmurs a thank you before walking behind a stand of trees.

While she is gone, I pack up both tents in their bags. Jayla’s tent poles appear to be shattered beyond repair, but the fabric can be salvaged if we can find something to hold it upright. I will have to remember to remove the tent from the bag tonight, since it is thick with moisture.

As I pack up my own tent, I debate whether or not we should stop again tonight. We could power through; we will probably only be a few hours from the city by the time the sun sets. But if we do that, I will not be able to hold her against me again. It might be the last time I am this close to her. The safer choice would be to keep going. It is one thing to trust me when she is freezing cold. It is another to willingly get into bed with me. Especially after everything that has passed between us.

I wish I had been strong enough not to fuck Jayla when she came to me that night so many years ago. But her body pressed against mine felt so damned good, and I just... I could not help myself. Looking back, there were many, many ways I could have handled it better, especially after we finished. I had been overwhelmed with the realization that we were not bonded; that she might find her true mate at any time, and leave me behind. The feeling was intense and painful, and I was unable to keep my mouth shut.

In the process, I hurt her badly. Apologies will not make it right; I know this. And even if they could, what would be the point? We are not bonded, and based on what has happened with my fellow warriors, it seems unlikely that we will suddenly become bonded. In all of their cases, the bond was instantaneous, at first sight; it did not come slowly over time. So despite how much I like Jayla, and how much I might want her, we are not meant to be.

The best thing I can do is keep my distance and leave her alone.

At that moment, Jayla emerges from the trees, wearing a white and pink dress made of light fabric. It falls to her ankles, flowing around her curves loosely. The sun is behind her, and I can see the shape of her body through the cloth. I groan to myself as she walks toward me, her hair blowing out behind her.

“Ready?” she asks softly.

“*Tak*,” I reply.

We climb into the hovercraft. Jayla takes a seat by my side, and I hand her a scone from the stock Ashley packed for us before we left. She thanks me quietly and takes a bite. I start the engine, and we set out across the prairie once more.

Chapter Seven - Jayla



The day passes slowly. Much more slowly than it would if I were with anyone else. I clench and unclench my jaw so much that my head starts to ache. Or maybe it's just aching because that's what it does now.

A wave of anxiety overwhelms me for a moment. All those nosebleeds... it can't be normal. I know something's wrong, and I think it's something pretty big. What if it's brain cancer? What will I do then?

Stop worrying, I chastise myself. You'll be in Xenyle this time tomorrow, and you'll talk to Julia then. There's no point in worrying about things you can't control.

But I do worry. Because it seems like things are getting worse.

Usually on the trip between the HuManor and Xenyle, we stop several times for breaks; to eat, to stretch our legs, etc. But not so much on this trip. We stop only long enough to empty our bladders and drink some water, and then we're on the road again. Frey hasn't said so, but I get the impression he's hoping we won't have to camp again. I try not to be hurt by the fact that he doesn't want to share a tent with me; it's probably for the best, even if it does feel like just another rejection.

It's after dark when we see the lights of the city in the distance. I breathe a sigh of relief; we'll reach it tonight. Frey glances over at me at the sound, but then looks away before I can engage with him.

Fine by me; I know he's as relieved as I am.



The streets of Xenyle are packed with people, even though it's getting late. There are markets selling everything from an alien version of a snow cone to mixed alcoholic drinks. It reminds me of a trip I took to New Orleans once.

The city has changed a lot since I first came here. Granted, back then there had been an attack that killed many people and left parts of the city broken and burnt. There was fear everywhere, worry everywhere.

Lots of people who had been in Xenyle for years packed up and left.

But then the new Council came in. Hester took over the human breeding program (now not so much about breeding and more about finding one's pair-bond), and created programs to welcome human women. She brought her husband Larric to Xenyle with her, a member of a former rival tribe. Along with the other members of the Council, they established peace and unity.

More and more Xalkes stuck around in the city, members of all three tribes, working together. Over the years, the city changed. More families moved in. People of different species started businesses together. There are restaurants, markets, little alleys with pop-up screens that play movies on a loop, selling crispy cricket-like bugs to snack on. They actually smell enough like popcorn that you can trick yourself into forgetting they're bugs.

We pass one of these little alley theatres, which happens to be playing a Tche movie, featuring a Ltuth actress. She presses her lips together, looking up at her Tche master with defiance in her eyes. The Tche is a classic example of his species: tall and slender with black eyes and long blond hair. He wears long black robes that reach to the ground, and an expression of cruel dominance. The Ltuth's hair is light blue, curled into corkscrews that frame a heart-shaped face. She wears a short dress with a low scoop at the neck, showing off large breasts. Her mouth curves up in a daring motion, almost as if she's enjoying the adversarial relationship between them.

I almost ask Frey to stop, I'm so intrigued. Ltuths aren't usually known to be ferocious. I want to know more.

But Frey doesn't stop. He weaves the hovercraft slowly through the streets, his jaw clenched tightly in concentration. I realize after a few minutes that he's headed for the Warehouse, where I have lived on and off for years.

I touch his shoulder gently, and his head turns. My heart lurches as I realize how close he is, his eyes dropping to my lips before returning to my eyes for just a moment. Then he glances away again, focusing back on driving.

"Can you drop me at the clinic?" I ask. "It's a little late, but I think Julia might still be there."

He hesitates, as if he isn't sure if he should drop me on the "wrong" side of town. Because Julia's clinic is definitely in the less-than-nice

part of the city. It's purposeful, she told me once. She wants to be accessible to the people who might need her most. Besides, it's a little seedy, but it's not dangerous. As she always says, "Poor doesn't equal evil."

Frey doesn't voice any specific concerns, but I can see his hesitation in his stance, and in the white grip of his fingers on the wheel of the hovercraft as he steers.

"I came back to see Julia. You know that's why I'm here," I say, trying to sound casual. "No reason to wait 'til tomorrow when I can see the doctor tonight."

The truth is, I want to get this over with as fast as I can. I don't want to spend another night pacing my room, worrying about what's going on in my body. As far as I know, Julia's going to take one look at me and say I need glasses or I have a bad tooth or something. God, I hope it's that simple. I hope I feel stupid for worrying.

Frey nods and re-directs the craft. It doesn't take long, and soon enough, he's parking the craft in front of the clinic. Over the years, Julia has really built this place into a sanctuary. In fact, she calls it Sanctuary Clinic.

The signs of welcome on the outside are written in every language she could think of, including Pan-Un, but also several Earth languages, Xalke, Ltuth, Zell, and even Trager. Not that I speak all those languages; Julia pointed each one out when she put the sign up, proud to be able to say she could provide translators for all of them, plus she's taking classes in Zell and Ltuth.

I turn and grab my bag from the back of the craft. I glance back at Frey, and swallow a lump in my throat. "Bye," I say. "Thanks for the ride."

Frey grunts as he swings himself over the side of the craft and lands on the ground. He comes around the side and offers me a hand down. I take it, trying to ignore the buzz of energy as I touch his hand. I force myself to let go and turn away, heading for the front door. I expect to hear the engine of the hovercraft starting up again, but instead, I hear only the sound of footsteps, following me toward the door.

I turn around and look at Frey quizzically. "Um, you don't have to—"

"I am going with you," he says shortly.

I blink in confusion for a moment, and then shake my head. “No you’re not,” I say. “It’s late. You should go home. I’ll probably be here a while and—”

“Even more reason for me to go with you,” he says. “You might need support.”

What kind of support are you going to give me, exactly? I want to ask. But I’m exhausted. Too tired to fight with him. And if I get bad news, maybe it isn’t the worst idea in the world to have someone else there with me. I don’t want to be vulnerable in front of him, but I also don’t want to be alone, trying to wind my way through the city streets when my eyes are blurry with tears.

So I nod, and walk to the front door, ringing the little buzzer.

The door flies open a moment later, revealing a gorgeous blonde with a short bob haircut. She looks as if she has run for the door. Still breathless, Julia pulls the door open wide, ushering me inside. Frey follows closely, shutting the door behind him.

“Jayla? What’s wrong?” Julia asks, looking me up and down. She seems really worried, her brow creased as she reaches out and takes my hands. “You’ve never used the emergency buzzer before.”

“Oh is it an emergency buzzer?” I ask. “I thought it was more like a doorbell, I’m sorry. It’s not an emergency. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You do not know that it is not an emergency,” Frey says from behind me.

I shoot him an irritated look over my shoulder. Like he has any idea what I know or don’t know.

“It’s ok,” Julia says. “If you need to come see me after dark, it means something pretty major is going on. Come back to the exam rooms. I’ll take a look.” She studies Frey for a moment. “You can wait up here,” she says.

“Ze,” Frey says sharply. “I will come with you.”

Julia raises an eyebrow and glances over at me. “That’s up to Jayla.”

I bite my lip for a moment and then nod. “He can come.”

Chapter Eight - Frey



I follow the two human females into a small exam room. Julia asks Jayla to sit on a bed of some kind, and then she sits in front of her on a stool, looking up. She asks Jayla questions while touching her wrist and checking the time on her wristwatch. When she nods to herself and writes something down, I have to stop myself from asking what kind of tests she is conducting.

Jayla describes the headaches clearly. She mentions the nosebleeds as well. "I have at least one a day now," she says, biting her lip with worry.

I growl low in my throat. Tal mentioned only three nosebleeds in the entire time she was at the HuManor, and Ashley did not correct him. If they were happening every day, she was hiding it from the others.

"Damn it, Jayla," I mutter.

Jayla shoots me a warning look, but does not respond.

Julia seems to agree that the matter is concerning, because she stands up and steps toward Jayla, feeling around her jaw line and around her nose as if looking for something.

"Have you been feeling run down?" she asks. "Having trouble getting up in the morning, or running out of energy during the day?"

"Sometimes," Jayla says slowly. "But doesn't everyone?"

"Sure," Julia says softly. "But... let me ask it this way: do you feel like yourself?"

Jayla shifts on the bed, her eyes darting to mine for a moment before she clears her throat. "Not as much as I'd like. I thought... I thought I was depressed."

Julia nods gently. "And that might be it," she says. "Depression can cause a lot of those symptoms. Let's rule some other things out, and then we'll schedule some time in the hospital next week to run some tests. Sound good?"

Jayla breathes out a long breath. "Sounds good," she says. "Thanks."

Julia grins at her. “No need to thank me,” she says. “Just doing my job.”

By the time we leave the clinic, I am more concerned than I was before. Jayla answered yes to an awfully high number of the doctor’s questions. Julia had stayed calm and professional, but even I could tell she was worried. After hearing Jayla’s responses to her questions, the doctor seemed to change her mind about running tests next week. Instead, she proposed that Jayla meet her at the hospital tomorrow morning “just to rule things out.”

Jayla is quiet as I drive us back to the warehouse. I try to think of something I can say that will help, or at least provide some kind of comfort, but I cannot think of a damned thing.

When we reach the warehouse, Jayla slides out of the hovercraft without waiting for me to help her down. She picks up her bag and then pauses, her eyes on the ground.

“Thanks for coming with me,” she says quietly. “I didn’t realize how hard it might be to face that alone.”

“I was honored to do it,” I say. After a moment of hesitation, I step closer to her, reaching out and touching the underside of her chin. She lifts her head, and I see that her eyes are shining with tears. “I will always be there for you, Jayla.”

She gives me a wobbly smile. “Will you?” she asks in a low voice. “Because...” She bites her lip and shakes her head. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

I know exactly what she is saying. That I might be here for now, but once I find my pair-bond, our friendship will be meaningless. I will be consumed with my need for this other woman. Jayla worries that I will not care about her anymore. And perhaps that is fair. After all, is that not what I fear from her?

“A pair-bond does not make us stop caring about the people who matter in our lives,” I tell her. “Look at Julia. She is bonded to Elter, but still she cares.”

Jayla offers me a soft smile that does not quite reach her eyes. “You’re right,” she says. “Thanks.”

We walk toward the house slowly. I long to reach out to her. To touch

her. My body burns with the memories of how it was when we were together. When I sank my cock deep inside her. The sounds she made as I thrust into her. I want to do it again, if only to take both our minds off of what just happened. I cast a longing look in her direction, and find her giving the same look back to me.

Lust flashes through me as I escort her through the doorway and into the atrium. Large insects called larrises flutter around us. Jayla laughs as she sees them. "Every time I come back here, there are more of these guys," she says, holding up her hand. One of them lands on her fingertips, fluttering its petal-like wings delicately. It is a vibrant pink and red with swirls that spiral out from the center of its body.

"I'm assuming no one's been trying to get rid of them since I left?" Jayla asks, looking over at me.

"Apparently not," I admit. "Nia has a soft spot for them."

"And we all have a soft spot for Nia," Jayla says, gazing at the larris tenderly. It flaps its wings and soars back into the air. Well. It flies haphazardly around the room. They are not the most graceful of creatures.

Even as I think the words, two larrises collide with my head, bumping off of me with dull thwacking noises that make Jayla snicker. I cast her a sardonic look and she smiles even broader. Her smile makes my heart pound.

I clear my throat and step back toward my own room, reminding myself that I want to build a friendship with Jayla; I do not want to lose her again to the silence that has defined the last few years since we had sex. Kissing her or fucking her again will only lead to heartbreak.

"What time do you want to depart for the hospital in the morning?" I ask her. "I believe we said we would meet Doctor Julia at 800 by your clocks." I nod at the clock in the hall, which was built by one of the human females. Our time measurement system is complex and confusing to the humans for some reason, so they tend to stick with their own. "Would you like to meet here at 730?"

"Oh..." Jayla's brow creases. "You don't have to come with me. I'm sure I'll be fine on my own."

"I am sure you would be fine, but you will not be on your own," I reply. "I am coming with you."

Jayla hesitates for a moment and then whispers, “Thank you,” as if I am doing this out of the kindness of my heart, instead of out of guilt for my behavior all those years ago. I am still hoping that my support here can help to redeem me. ... And if I am honest with myself, I cannot stand the idea of not knowing if she is all right.

The morning arrives, cold and wet. Unable to sit still while I wait for the time to pass, I decide to visit the gym, which Elter and some of the others use to train. It is directly next door to the clinic Julia set up for the human females who have chosen to live on Xenyle.

I try to ignore the happy sounds of families as they come and go from the clinic. I try not to imagine Jayla’s voice among them. I even consider checking in with Julia about Jayla’s appointment (though it will be at the hospital, not the clinic), but I suspect that neither female would appreciate it if I inserted myself into a conversation about Jayla’s health without her present. After a long workout, I step back out into the rain and run back to the warehouse. Usually, I take the long way through the city, enjoying the sights and smells of the place.

My father told me that my mother loved Xenyle. It was her favorite place in the universe, he often said, though she did not grow up here. She was not a Xalke of course; there were no female Xalkes until the humans came along. In fact, she was a Ragator—not a Zell like many of my compatriots’ mothers. Ragators, even the females, are tall and broad with rippling muscles. They are famous for their ferocious natures.

Unfortunately, her nature was not strong enough to save her from my birth.

I should be used to the idea. After all, the death of the mother was a given for every Xalke before we discovered our compatibility with humans. But my father mourned her deeply, keeping her memory alive in the stories he told me when he came to the training fields to see me.

I think of my mother all the way back to the warehouse. I do this often when I run; imagining what she might think of me. Imagining how she might feel about the discovery of our species’ ability to breed with humans. Would she be proud of me? Would she feel shame that I was not stronger or more like a Ragator?

When I arrive back at the warehouse, I shower and change my clothes,

and then it is time to go. As I open the door, I find Jayla waiting in the atrium. She is sitting on the side of the small fountain, biting her fingernail carefully. She rises to a stand as she sees me, and offers me a small smile. "There's a leak in my room," she says.

"A leak?"

She nods and points toward her room. The door is open, and I can see a bucket sitting in the center of the floor, catching raindrops with a plunking sound.

"Should I ask someone to come and fix it?"

Jayla shakes her head. "I already told Nia about it," she says. "She told me she's on it. No need to do anything else." She gets to her feet and walks toward me, her eyes uncertain. "Are you sure you want to come? It's pretty wet out there..."

"*Tak*," I say tightly. "I am coming."

"Ok," Jayla says. She lets out a shaky laugh and hugs herself. "Truth is, I didn't want to go alone."

"I understand," I say. "But I am sure all will be well."

Jayla forces a smile at that, and looks away. I kick myself for the lie; how does it help either of us to pretend that nothing is wrong when we know very well that something might be?

I clench my jaw as we step out into the cold rain. We take one of the smaller crafts, this one with a covering that blocks our heads from the rain. It is smaller than the one we took across the prairie, and Jayla's side is pressed firmly against mine. My hand longs to slide over and grip her knee comfortingly. I lean my knee toward her, hoping that my presence provides at least a little support.

Jayla leans back, which makes my chest swell with emotion. I consider putting my arm over her shoulders, but dismiss it. We are friends, and we will never be anything more. Going with her to this appointment will have to be enough for now, for both of us. I start the engine and navigate the craft toward the hospital.

Chapter Nine - Jayla



The tests don't take that long, but it feels as if the results are taking forever. I sit in an uncomfortable chair in a waiting room of sorts, looking out at the city below us. The rain is falling hard now, its luminescent quality making the buildings and streets glow just a little bit. It's beautiful. I try to enjoy it, but the knot in my stomach won't go away.

I know in my heart that something is really wrong with me.

When Julia appears in the doorway of the waiting room, the look on her face confirms my worst fears. I hear Frey curse from behind me as I stand up and make my way toward her.

"Julia?" I ask.

Julia's eyes look up over my shoulder at Frey. "Do you want to talk alone?" she asks.

I shake my head. I don't have the energy to fight with Frey about getting him to leave the room. Or maybe I want him here. I'm not up for analyzing it, honestly. "Just tell me," I say. I force a small smile. "Rip the band-aid off."

Julia nods slowly and leads us to a small room. She ushers us inside before closing the room. Frey is so large in the space that it's hard to maneuver around him, but we manage. Julia sits in one chair, and Frey and I sit across from her. I clasp my hands in my lap as she gives me the worst possible news.

Afterwards, Frey follows me out of the hospital and back to the hovercraft. It's raining even harder now, but I don't feel the chill even though I can see my breath in the air. I get into the passenger's seat and let Frey drive. I can hear his voice every once in a while. He might be asking me questions. He might be telling me something important. I can't listen. I can't hear anything but the roaring in my ears.

Cancer.

Can there be anything more fucking ridiculous than getting regular old human cancer on an alien fucking planet?

“Jayla? Are you all right?” Frey asks.

I blink up at him, realizing for the first time that the hovercraft has stopped. Frey has turned his chair sideways to face me. His brow is creased with worry. I open my mouth to say that yes, I’m fine, but all that comes out is laughter. At first it’s just a sad little laugh, but then I can’t seem to stop. I laugh so hard that my belly hurts and my face aches. Tears stream down my cheeks. Frey doesn’t say anything. He just sits beside me, watching me, until finally the laughter turns to sobs and I collapse forward with my head between my legs.

He makes a low sound in his throat and stands, picking me up in his arms. I press my face into his chest and let the tears fall. I feel him moving but I don’t care where we’re going. I don’t care about anything right now except that Frey is warm and he smells like comfort.

A few moments later, he’s laying me down on a bed. I look around, surprised to find that I’m not in my usual room.

“There are three Xalkes in your room trying to fix the ceiling,” he says quietly. “I thought you might prefer not to talk to them right now.”

“So you brought me to your room?” I ask, looking up at him.

He nods sharply and then turns away, walking to the other side of the room. He sits down in a chair and leans forward, elbows on his knees. He stares at me. With a sigh, I sit up and press my back against the wall, hugging my knees to my chest. I look down at my clothes, which are still dripping. “I’ll get your sheets all wet,” I say.

“It is all right,” Frey says. “I can change them.”

I nod and stay where I am, too exhausted to move anyway. The clouds are still thick in the sky, and the light in the room is dim. Neither of us reaches for the light switch.

“When do you want to leave?” Frey asks.

“Leave?”

“For the doctor,” he says. “The one Julia recommended.”

I worry my bottom lip, trying to remember what Julia had said. I vaguely remember her saying something about a doctor, but I can’t remember the specifics. I shake my head.

Frey seems to misunderstand, because he jumps to his feet and crosses the room with long, even strides. He looms over the bed, looking down at me. "You are going to get help, Jayla," he says in a tense voice.

I huff out a humorless laugh. "Funny, I didn't think it was up to you," I reply.

"Damn it, female," Frey says, running his hands through his hair again. He turns away from me and then looks back, as if trying to decide how hard to push me. "If there is a chance that you might survive this—"

"Relax, I'm going," I say, holding up my hand to stop him before he spirals out of control. "I just don't need you commanding me to go. You don't get a say in what I do, remember?"

Frey glowers down at me, clearly less than pleased with my words. He stands there for a moment staring at me, his arms crossed over his chest. "This is about your protection, and I will not allow you to put yourself in danger."

"Why the hell not?" I snap. "It's not like it matters. My precious womb isn't being used to make a Xalke baby, and there's no one out there who will miss me, really miss me, when I'm gone."

Frey's jaw tightens. "That is not true," he growls. "You would be very much missed."

"By whom, exactly? My friends? Sure, they'd be sad for a while, but then they'd go back to their lives with their husbands and kids and that would be that."

He steps closer, and I scowl at him, mostly because my heart beats faster at his approach. "I would miss you," he rasps. "Deeply."

I swallow hard, trying to hold back the emotions that come to the surface with his words. "Well, that's nice I guess," I whisper. "And... thank you for coming with me today. I appreciate it. Especially since the news was so bad. It would have been hard to hear that alone."

Frey nods. "Of course," he says.

There's a silence that's probably awkward, but I'm too worn out to care. I slide down onto the bed, my head hitting the pillow. "I'm gonna sleep for a bit, ok?" I say.

“Yes,” Frey replies. “Sleep.”

I drift off thinking that the pillow smells like him; masculine and warm and comforting; I know I shouldn't be breathing him in like he's the cure to all my problems. It's a bad idea, and it will only make things hurt more later, but I can't stop myself. He is exactly what I need right now.

I wake up to the sound of voices outside the room. At first, I consider staying in bed. Whatever they want, it can wait. I'm tired, and I don't need to see people's pitying expressions. But then I hear Frey's voice among the crowd, his voice low and commanding. My irritation spikes. Is he trying to keep them away from me?

I get out of his bed and walk across the room, throwing the door open. Five faces snap up to look at mine, wearing expressions with various levels of guilt. Hester, Clara, Laurie, Callie, and Frey are all standing there, larrises smacking into their heads as they stare at me.

“What's going on, everyone?” I ask.

“Frey says you're leaving today for Sothach,” Callie says softly.

“But he won't tell us why,” Hester says. “So we're all out here speculating wildly, and it's driving us nuts.”

I glance at Frey, who is staring at me with a haunted expression. Fucking unbelievable. For super tough alien warriors, these guys have an awful lot of emotions, and terrible poker faces.

“It's really nothing,” I say with a little laugh. “She's not sure, but Julia thinks my headaches might be stress related,” I say. “She wants me to get a second opinion from the Doc.”

There's a collective sigh of relief, and arms get thrown around my shoulders as all the girls hug me. “Thank god,” Laurie says.

“Yeah, we thought it was something really serious,” Hester says. “The Doc isn't exactly the best resource we've got. Why does she want you to go there?”

I shrug. “Dunno. Guess she thinks he has some insight since he's been digging around in these two's brains already,” I point to Laurie and Clara.

Laurie snorts. “Fair enough. Hope he learned something useful.”

Clara looks more concerned. “If you want to talk about it, let me know, but there’s no pressure.”

“Thanks,” I say, offering her what I hope seems like a casual grin. “I might just do that. Especially if you’re offering to make me those cinnamon twist thingies.”

Clara nods and touches my shoulder briefly. The others follow her down the hall toward the kitchen.

Once they turn the corner, I round on Frey. “Why the hell did you tell them I was going to the Doc?” I hiss.

He looks startled by the question. “They are your friends, are they not? Did you not want them to know?”

“No, I didn’t want them to know,” I snap.

“Well, you did not tell them the truth, so I imagine they will not worry too much.”

“Are you kidding? You don’t know them. I’m going off-planet to get an opinion about a problem. No one else has gotten sick here, you know. They’re all blooming with fucking health, having beautiful babies and skipping around happily. Julia came here to stop them from dying and practically none of them have had the slightest fucking complication.”

“You do not have a complication,” Frey says darkly. “You are sick.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I say. “Like I could have forgotten. Now that they know I’ve got a problem, they’re going to worry about me. They’re going to chase after me, check up on me, and generally look at me like I’m a wounded animal. Plus they all have enough to worry about in their own lives.”

Frey snorts at that. “What do they have to worry about, exactly?” he asks. “They all have their pair-bonds and families. You and I are the only ones who...” He trails off, blinking sheepishly.

“Really killing it over here, dude,” I reply. “Reminding me of how alone I am? Super helpful.”

“Despite how it seems, it truly was my intention to help,” he mutters.

I close my eyes and lean back against the wall with a sigh. “I know,” I

say, shaking my head. "Sorry. I'm just... everything sucks right now, and my friends being worried about me only makes me feel worse."

"That was not what I wanted to happen," Frey says in a low voice. "I was hoping that you might take some comfort from them."

"I get it." I glance past Frey at my room. The door is closed. "Did they finish fixing the ceiling yesterday?"

Frey hesitates for a moment and then shakes his head no. "They have to source some additional parts," he tells me.

"Of course they do," I say grumpily. "Is it ok if I sleep in your room for a while? I'm feeling tired."

Frey nods.

"Thanks," I say. And I turn and walk back into his room, closing the door behind me. I flop down on the bed on my belly and close my eyes. The pillow still smells like Frey, and I breathe in his scent, willing it to comfort me. It works better than I might have expected.

Chapter Ten - Frey



I pace the floor of the clinic, trying not to lose my temper at Doctor Julia. She is watching me with one eyebrow arched as if my frustration is entertaining.

"She is asleep," I tell her. "She has been asleep all day. That cannot be normal."

"Well no, it's not, but she has brain cancer."

"Explain this to me," I order her. "Tell me what this 'cancer' word means."

"Xalkes don't get cancer?" Julia asks, interested.

"I do not know if we get it or not because you will not tell me what it is," I retort.

Julia rubs her face and sighs, then leans forward and explains this word 'cancer'.

"How serious is it?" I ask when she is done.

Julia presses her lips together. "It can be treatable," she says. "Or..."

"Or what?" I growl. "Tell me."

"Or it can be deadly. Brain cancer is particularly worrying. Especially since the scans show a pretty big mass. If we were home, we'd have more options. But here... I'm not sure what we can do."

"You will help her," I say through clenched teeth. "You will save her."

Julia gives me a sympathetic look. "I know this is hard. I really think Sothach is her best chance. I told the Doc that she's coming, and I booked a transport for tomorrow. There's really nothing else for us to do. Well, nothing more for me to do."

"What can I do, if you can do nothing?"

"You can be there for her," Julia says softly. "She's depressed. Scared. She needs friendship and support right now."

I hesitate. There is nothing I would like more than to comfort Jayla

right now. Everything else aside, her illness bothers me far more than it should. Until her pair-bond shows up to take over, I am the closest thing she has to a protector.

But I doubt she would see it that way.

“You can help with those things,” I tell her. “You can make her feel better.”

Julia folds her arms across her chest. “And how exactly do you want me to do that?” she asks. “Do you want me to lie to her? Because first of all, bad idea, and second of all, I won’t, and third of all, Jayla’s too smart for that.”

“I do not want you to lie to her,” I growl. “I just want you to give her hope.”

“Seems to me that you can give her hope as much as I can,” Julia says.

I give her a look and go back to pacing. “She will not listen to me,” I say, more to myself than to anyone else. “She does not even want me here.”

“So then what are you doing here?” Julia asks.

I stop pacing and try to examine my thoughts. “I am not sure,” I admit. “I just want to help her. I do not want to make things worse.”

“Why do you think you might make things worse?” she asks.

“Because every time we get closer, our feelings become more intense.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It is bad,” I reply. “It is. Because we are not bonded. If she begins to depend on me, I might start to depend on her, as well. And then when she meets her partner...”

“You’ll be left all alone?” Julia finishes for me. “I don’t know, that sounds like a pretty petty problem when your buddy has brain cancer.”

“It is,” I agree. “And I am trying not to think this way, but it is... it is difficult.”

“Because you have feelings for her?” Julia asks.

“*Tak*, of course I do. She is my friend.”

“Then maybe stop worrying about what *might* happen and start worrying about what *is* happening,” Julia says. “Because I’m here to tell you, that’s bad enough.”

Jayla sleeps until the next morning. I rouse her about an hour before the transport is set to depart, and force her to eat something before she stumbles into the shower. When she emerges, she seems to have found some of her spunk again, as she says. Her hair is still wet from the shower as she heads out of my room and into the atrium, the scent of flowers wafting around her as she moves.

She is wearing a blue dress with short sleeves and a flowing skirt that swishes around her knees. Her legs are bare beneath the fabric. Once I notice, I cannot stop thinking about how it would feel to skate my fingers along that smooth, beautiful skin. My hand aches to run from her ankle to her knee and then higher...

Clearing my throat, I grab our bags and follow her out of the warehouse toward the docks.

“Thanks for carrying my stuff,” she says over her shoulder. She frowns as she notices how much I am carrying. “I’m not sure I’ll need this much though. I don’t remember packing three bags...”

“I am coming with you,” I reply.

She stops walking. I do not notice for a few steps, and almost run into her before I realize she is no longer moving toward the transport.

“No, you’re not,” she says.

“I am,” I reply. I reach for her arm, but she shakes me off and steps back.

“I didn’t want my friends to feel sorry for me,” she says. “As you might imagine, I want your pity even less. You can bring my bag to the ship if you want, I’m not going to stop you, but that’s the end of it. I have no interest in having you with me.”

I scowl at her and step closer. When she backs away again, I drop all of our bags to the ground and grab hold of her waist, pulling her tight against me. Her breath catches as her chest brushes against mine, and I’m instantly hard. Cursing myself for touching her, I try to force myself to let go, but I can’t do it. The sweet smell of her soap drifts over me again, and I clutch her tighter.

“Listen to me,” I grind out. “You are my responsibility, and I am going to make sure—”

“In what fucking world am I your responsibility?” she hisses. “I’m my own responsibility and no one else’s. You’re not my father or my brother or my pair-bond. Get off of me and let me go.”

“I am the closest thing you have to someone who cares about you,” I growl.

“Oh because we fucked once?” Jayla says, her face twisting angrily. “Great. So that means you get to control me now? Leave me the fuck alone.” She shakes herself free and looks daggers at me. “How dare you?”

I run my hands through my hair angrily, trying to control myself. Part of me wants to throw her over my shoulder and carry her the rest of the way. She could not break free if I decided to do so, I know this. But I also do not want to force her; she is already losing enough control over her life without me adding to it.

“Listen, female. If you do not let me go with you, I will go back to the house and tell the others about your condition. They were worried when they thought this was stress. Imagine their reaction when they find out the truth. I am sure one or more of them will insist on joining you on Sothach.”

Her eyes flick back to the house and then return to mine, her anger tinged with uncertainty. She knows as well as I do that all of them would be deeply upset to hear about what is really happening.

“You wouldn’t,” she says through clenched teeth.

“I would,” I growl. “Mark my words, female, I will tell them all. Then it will be their responsibility to figure out who should escort you. Perhaps it will be Callie or Laurie or Hester. But no matter who is chosen, her bonded male will insist on coming along. So you will have companions who love each other very much, probably fucking every time you turn around, while you try to manage a life-threatening disease. Won’t that be comforting?”

Jayla glares at me angrily, her hands clenched into tiny fists at her sides. “I hate you,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “You think you’re making this better but really you’re making it so much fucking worse.”

“So be it,” I tell her selfishly. “I am still coming with you.”

She hesitates. I can see her weighing her options. I am holding my breath, hoping that she does not call my bluff. Because even if she says she would rather have the other humans with her, I am going to be at her side until this is resolved.

A voice in the back of my head asks me why I am so dedicated to this. Why I cannot just let her do as she likes. I silence that voice as fast as I can. I do not want to analyze this. Suffice to say that Jayla needs support; she is my friend, and I will be there to help her. There is no need to worry about why.

“Fine,” Jayla says finally, her eyes blazing with hatred. “You can come.”

“Excellent,” I reply, picking up our bags, and gesturing toward the transport ship. “After you.”

Jayla gives me a look that says she would prefer that I die a slow and agonizing death, but then she steps forward, storming toward the ship. We step on board, and meet our driver, a Ragator who seems as disinterested in us as he would be in a shipment of empty crates. Just as well.

There is no other crew, so we are left to find our cabins on our own. I walk Jayla to the guest quarters. Jayla steps into the first cabin labeled “guest,” and turns to face me with a glare. Without a word, she smashes the button to close the door. It slides shut in my face before I can even hand her her bag.

Chapter Eleven - Jayla



I'm a mess. I guess that's to be expected when you find out you have cancer. I'm trying my best to keep it together, but having Frey here doesn't help. It really, really doesn't. Every time he looks at me with that worried expression, I want to lean on his shoulder and cry. I want to let his big strong arms surround me and take care of me.

But if I do that, I'll only fall deeper in love with him.

The captain of this transport doesn't seem inclined to talk to us much. A bell rings through an intercom, and the ship launches, flying out of the Beshtast atmosphere with all the grace of a larris in the dark. I change into a soft white nightgown with spaghetti straps that criss-cross in the back. Then I lie down on the bed, looking up at the metal ceiling, trying not to think about what comes next.

I must have fallen asleep, because I wake up to find Frey leaning over me, his eyes filled with concern.

"Jesus," I say, sitting up with a start. My forehead clunks hard into his, and we both reel back in pain. "Son of a bitch," I curse, gripping my head.

"Are you all right?" Frey asks urgently. "Jayla, let me see." He braces his hands on either side of me and leans down, touching my forehead. "Did I hurt you?"

I blink up at him, my head aching. "I'm the one who hit you," I say.

His fingers are cool and gentle as he slides them along my cheek. His eyes turn smoky as he stares down at me. "You might have been injured," he says. "Your brain..."

"I'm not a doctor, but I don't think you can make brain cancer worse by head-butting someone."

"You did nothing with your butt," Frey says, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

I laugh at that, and push him away gently so I can sit up. He doesn't move far, just turns to sit next to me on the bed. His hands drop to mine and he holds them carefully, as if I'm fragile enough that I might

crack and break.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I thought you might need to eat,” Frey says.

At the words, my stomach rumbles loudly. I look down at it in surprise. “I guess I do,” I say. “But is there any real food? It seemed like this captain guy wasn’t all that interested in client service.”

“No, he is not,” Frey agrees with a look of irritation. “But I brought some food with us.” He gets off the bed and crosses the room, where I see his bag lying on a small chair. He opens it and pulls out a long stick of meat jerky.

As he hands it to me, I bite into it gratefully. Jerky isn’t my favorite, but it’s food. And this one has a strangely delicious flavor. Not just salt, but also something tangy and a little sweet. “This is surprisingly good,” I tell Frey as I take another bite.

He looks at me with pride. “My thanks,” he says. “I made it myself.”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise as I look down at the meat stick. “Really? How...?”

“One of the tricks I picked up on the training fields,” he says with a shrug. He walks back to his bag and pulls out another stick of jerky, taking a bite and relishing the flavor with a low growl.

Heat pools in my belly at the sound. I find myself wondering if I could get him to make that noise for me. If I were to get down on my knees in front of him and pull out his real meat stick...

My cheeks burn and I chuckle to myself at my own dirty joke. He gives me a questioning look, and I shrug it off as I keep eating... But once it gets into my head, it’s hard to shut the thoughts down.

After all, we’re alone in my room, and God knows I could use the distraction.

With an internal sigh, I finish my jerky and try to put the feelings aside. More likely than not, Frey would be absolutely horrified that I’m thinking about sex when we’re on our way to meet with a doctor about cancer.

When I finally raise my eyes from my “dinner”—such as it is—I find him watching me with a strange expression on his face. “Thanks for

the food,” I say. “It was really good. I had no idea you knew how to make anything like that. Did someone teach you at the training fields?”

“Ze,” Frey says as he finishes his own. “But food storage was always a challenge in the fields. I learned how to preserve the meat by testing different methods. And then I figured out how to flavor it from there. We had a few younger soldiers who did not eat well, but they liked the jerky. It helped.”

“What happened to them? The younger soldiers, I mean.”

“Some of them completed their training and became Denne,” Frey says. “I see them from time to time. Some became Vuun, and went their own way. And some... some did not survive.”

“Well shit,” I say, sitting back against the wall behind the bed. “That’s awful.”

“It is,” Frey replies. “The training fields were a tragedy. We should have seen that ourselves, but it was so ingrained in our culture, I think we were all blind to it.”

“You were sent there as infants, right?”

“Tak,” Frey replies. “Before we found humans, none of our mothers survived childbirth. Xalke babies were already outcasts, of course.”

“What do you mean?”

“The legend goes that the first Xalkes were born from Tche parents. Our green skin and muscular bodies made it clear that we were different from them. “

I nod. The Tche aren’t most people’s favorite species on Beshtast. I’ve only met a couple, but from what I understand, they’re usually nice enough to look at—tall with long, blond hair and ice-blue eyes—and they tend to dress well and take care of themselves, unlike the Tragers. But the main thrust of their culture is that they think they’re superior to every other species. I can’t imagine they responded well to muscular green babies being born into their families.

Frey looks off into the distance. “The lucky ones were cast out. They formed their own villages on the outskirts of the Tche cities. They took care of each other. Eventually, they founded Beshtast.”

“I’ve heard parts of the story before, but I didn’t realize your people

had already been driven away from your home,” I say gently.

Frey shakes his head. “Beshtast is our home. I am no more Tche than you are. These things... even if they are true, they happened long, long ago. They are so far removed from our current lives that they might as well be myths.”

“But your parents did the same thing to you. They cast you out.”

Frey frowns as if surprised. “I never thought of being sent to the training fields as being cast out. I doubt our fathers saw it that way. Our fathers... well, they were not used to raising children. Some were more involved than others.”

“What about your father?” I ask softly. “Was he involved?”

“*Tak*,” Frey says with a small, sad smile. “Unlike so many others, he was a good man. He loved my mother, and often came to tell me stories about her. She was a Ragator.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “A Ragator. Isn’t that unusual? I thought most Xalkes were born to Zell women.”

“They are,” Frey says. “But my father loved my mother. They did not mean to get pregnant; I was an accident. As my father calls it ‘a surprise from the Goddess.’ And they both thought, since she was so strong, she might survive my birth. Unfortunately, that was not the case. I am not sure my father ever got over it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say, genuinely meaning it. “That must have been really hard for him.”

Frey nods thoughtfully. “He died a few years before we made the trip to Earth. I was with him. The last word from his lips as he died was her name: *Yurille*.”

My breath catches. It’s a surprisingly romantic story. Almost all of the older generation of Xalkes I have met are the opposite; focused on their own status and power, with no regard for the lives of the women they’ve impregnated. Before we got here, in fact, there was very little thought given to the importance of female lives. The Xalke warriors sold and traded Zell and other compatible species for their wombs and little more. Frey’s father sounds like something of an outlier.

But maybe I shouldn’t be so surprised; after all, Frey struck up a friendship with me, didn’t he? Even though he didn’t feel the pair-bond, he took the time to get to know me. Even the younger

generation of Xalkes—the ones who are married to human women—don't seem all that interested in anyone they're not bonded to. It's better than wanting us as mere breeders, I think, since they genuinely care about their brides, but at the same time, they didn't really have to learn much about their partners; the pair-bond made all the connections for them. For Frey and me, it's different. Or anyway, I think it is.

Is that why he's so hell-bent on this pair-bond shit? Because his father loved his mother so much, and he wants the same thing for himself? But Frey's father didn't have a pair-bond with his mother; they didn't even know that Xalkes *could* pair-bond before humans.

I shake my head to clear it. This isn't a conversation about me and Frey. It's about Frey's parents; his past. I don't need to make it about myself.

"Sounds like your dad was a good guy," I say softly.

"I think he was," Frey says thoughtfully. "Though I know I reminded him of her quite a bit, our relationship was a good one." His expression hardens slightly. "Perhaps it would have been a better one, though, if we had lived in the same place. Perhaps I would have had a childhood that involved less starvation and desperation."

"I'm sorry you had to go through the training fields. All of you."

Frey nods. "Thank you. But we perpetuated it on ourselves. Even my father, who cared about me deeply, thought that because it was how he was raised, it was the right way to raise his child. And obviously my mother was not available to provide her opinion on the subject." He sighs and rubs his face with his hands. "We should have closed the fields long ago. You and the other females have opened our eyes to their horrors. I am glad that our people can see it now. Things will be better for our children than they were for us."

The words *our children* stick in my head. Even though I know it's not what he meant, a surge of pain shoots through me. There will never be any children for the two of us. Frey is going to find his stupid pair-bond and have lots of big, brawny green children, and I'll... well, I guess I'll be alone. Maybe I'll live, maybe I'll die. But I'm sure as hell not going to grow big and round with his child inside of me. He's not going to kiss my belly and murmur words of love in my ear about how beautiful I look, carrying his child.

I clear my throat. "I think I should sleep," I tell him.

To my shock, Frey growls and turns on the bed, his eyes targeting me with complete focus. The change is so abrupt that I have to bite back a surprised cry. He crawls over to me and comes close, inspecting my eyes carefully. "You have just awoken," he says in a low voice. "Are you so ill that you need to go back to sleep right away?"

"Yes," I say. "I mean no." I squeeze my eyes closed, trying not to be overwhelmed with the masculine scent that rolls over me in waves. "I can't think when you're this close to me."

Frey is so quiet that I finally open my eyes. I find him staring at my lips. My heartbeat quickens at the look of lust that runs across his face.

"It is hard for me, too," he says in a low voice.

"What is?" I whisper.

"Thinking when I am this close to you," he murmurs. "Thinking about anything other than burying myself inside you. I think about it often, you know." He shifts his weight and raises a hand to my face, cupping my jaw in his large palm. "The taste of you. It haunts me."

I shiver. He runs his thumb over my lower lip, and I let my mouth slide open under the demand of his touch. His eyes flare with heat as my tongue flicks out and touches the pad of his finger ever so gently.

"Jayla," he says tightly. "Do not start something you do not intend to finish."

"Who says I don't want to finish it?" I say, my voice wavering with arousal.

Frey curses softly and leans forward, his mouth claiming mine in a searing kiss. His lips slant over mine, sucking and nipping. His hands move over my body as his tongue runs over my bottom lip, mimicking the movements of his fingers not moments ago. I flick my own tongue out to meet his, and he growls.

He moves like lightning, and suddenly I find myself straddling his lap. The fabric of my nightgown pools at my thighs. He sits with his back pressed to the headboard of the bed, his hands on my hips.

I move slightly and feel his cock pressed against the juncture of my thighs. My body feels like it's burning. There is only me and him in the whole universe; just the two of us with nothing else in our future or our past.

“Frey,” I whisper, letting my head fall back as his arms surround me.

He leaves my lips and presses kisses along my jaw and down my neck. His hand moves up to clutch my breast. He squeezes it hard, and I let out a little cry. Immediately, the pressure disappears, and Frey’s gaze lifts to my eyes. “Did I hurt you?” he rasps.

I shake my head. “I liked it,” I reply.

He groans low in his throat. His fingers move up my arm to the strap of my nightgown. He slips one strap down my shoulder slowly, as if he’s waiting for me to resist. When I don’t, he pulls the strap lower, and my breast springs loose from the fabric. His hand palms against my flesh, hot and possessive. The heat of his touch makes me arch against him, rubbing against his hard length.

His movements become jerky, as if he’s lost control. He grabs the hem of my dress and pulls it up over my head, throwing it across the room. I’m topless now, wearing just a pair of panties that have seen better days.

But Frey’s eyes darken as if I’m wearing the sexiest outfit he’s ever seen. He stares at my breasts for a moment before leaning in to kiss one of my nipples. His lips are gentle at first, but when I moan and press against him, he opens his mouth and pulls my nipple between his lips, sucking and nipping at the sensitive bud. His hand comes up and circles my other nipple.

Without thinking, I press my hips down against him, moving the way I wish I could move without anything between us. I grind my pussy down on him, finding a motion that pushes against my clit, lost in a haze of pleasure.

“Jayla,” he breathes as he switches his mouth to my other breast. He sucks harder now, and I shudder.

I let my eyes slide shut and give in to the sensations of the moment. The way his tongue feels against my nipple. The way his cock feels beneath me. I want more. So, so much more. But I’m afraid that if I push things, he’ll back away. Instead I just move against him, trying to savor what he’s willing to give me, and not ask for more.

My body buzzes with desire, and I move faster, on the edge of an orgasm. I can feel it building, but it’s not quite there. Without thinking, I reach between us and unzip his trousers. His cock springs free, and I curl my hand around it, pumping the shaft a few times

before pressing the tip to my clit.

In the back of my mind, I'm waiting for Frey to protest. I'm waiting for him to push me back; to tell me that I'm taking this too far and we should stop. I imagine that he's on the fence about this whole thing, placating me, letting me get my rocks off because he feels sorry for me. Pretty soon, he'll stop the train and leave me high and dry.

Boy, am I wrong.

With a deep, rumbling growl, Frey flips me onto my back. My breasts jiggle a little with the movement, which seems to make him even more intense. His body covers mine, his cock pressed hard against the juncture of my thighs.

"Jayla," he groans as his mouth returns to my breasts. He sucks hard and then nips at me until I let out a small cry. "Jayla, I need you."

"Me too," I practically weep. "Please."

Suddenly, he's gone. His weight, so comforting and dominant, has disappeared. I sit up, startled, only to realize that Frey is standing at the end of the bed, stripping off his clothes as if they are on fire.

"Panties," he says in a husky voice. "Now."

I hook the waistline of my panties with my thumbs and push them down to my ankles, kicking them off my right foot. They go flying off the bed.

In a moment, Frey is on top of me again, the tip of his cock pressed against my core. "Tell me you want this," he growls.

"I want it," I respond before he's even done speaking. "I—oh god!"

In the middle of my sentence, Frey thrusts into me with a single motion, burying himself to the hilt inside me. My pussy stretches to accomodate his size, fluttering on the edge between pleasure and pain. It is sublime. I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a keening cry as he begins to move.

At first, his tempo is slow and steady. He pulls almost all the way out and then pushes back inside slowly, letting me feel every inch of him. His hips move at a languid, rhythmic pace that sets my body buzzing. He pulls my legs up and hooks them over his shoulders, leaning down over me. It's intimate, dominant, possessive... amazing.

“Fuck,” I hiss. “Just like that.”

My words spur him on, and Frey starts to move faster. His hips pump harder. His hands grab ahold of mine and he pushes them up above my head, holding them in place as he fucks me into the mattress with every inch of his strength.

“Look at me, Jayla,” he demands through gritted teeth. “I want to watch you when you cum.”

I hold my eyes open as my orgasm builds. His body works above mine, and the only sound is my skin slapping against his, urgently, brutally. I reach the pinnacle and fall over the edge, arching my back as I call his name. Waves of pleasure rock my body.

Frey shudders and starts to fuck me more roughly, his cock claiming me, taking me. When he cums, it is with my name on his lips, pouring his seed deep into my channel.

Chapter Twelve - Frey



The next two days pass like a dream. We sleep together, touching each other, holding each other, cherishing each other, fucking each other. I learn that she likes it when I take control; when I get a little rough with her. When I command her. But I also learn about what kinds of foods she likes—savory and sweet together. She asks questions like “Would you rather visit the ocean or the mountains?” and we debate the benefits of each.

Over the course of the trip, I am reminded that Jayla is more than a friend to me. She is an ally, a confidant, and by far the best sexual partner I have ever had. I wish more than ever that I could feel a bond between us—that I could make this last a lifetime.

And then, just before we land on Sothach, I make the mistake of telling her exactly that.

She blinks at me for a moment and then pulls the sheets around herself and gets out of the bed, walking to the window. She runs her hands through her hair, though she does not succeed in removing the knot caused by our lovemaking. Her shoulders rise and fall as if she is trying to calm herself. Finally she looks back at me, her eyes wide and full of tears.

“So you’re saying, after all of this, you still don’t feel connected to me?”

I slip out of the bed and move toward her, but she holds up a hand, asking me not to touch her. I stop in my tracks and look down at her. My chest clenches as I see the wary hurt in her eyes. I did not mean to cause it. I did not realize she was feeling differently from myself.

“Do you feel a pair-bond to me, Jayla?” I ask.

She sighs and rubs her face with her hands. “I thought... it doesn’t matter.”

“What did you think?” I ask.

Jayla turns to face the window, and we watch as we get closer to the space station. From the look of it, I am dubious that this place could be of any help at all. There is a central sphere with rotating rings

around it. All of them seem like they might have once been a bright gold color, but between patching and the dents from asteroids and space junk, the color has faded to a dull brown.

“Jayla,” I prod her. “Tell me.”

“On Earth, we don’t have pair-bonds, you know,” she says, her voice trembling. “Like your mom and dad. We just... love each other. We meet someone we like, we’re attracted, we get to know each other, and that’s... that’s love. I guess I thought that after the last few days, you were letting the pair-bond thing go. That you were ready to really give this a try.” She shakes her head and closes her eyes. “It’s stupid. Of course you were just trying to distract me. And I appreciate it, I do. I just thought we were feeling the same thing. The same connection.”

I step closer, but Jayla slides away.

“It’s better if we don’t touch right now,” she says.

I clench my jaw and stay still though my whole body screams that I should grab her and lift her into my arms. I want to carry her back to the bed and make her forget about all of this, including the imminent arrival at the station.

“I was not trying to distract you,” I growl.

“It’s ok,” she says with a sad smile. “It was effective.” Her eyes are still on the window.

“Jayla,” I say in a low voice. “Look at me.”

She turns to face me, her eyes looking up into mine. There is distrust there, and even fear. As if she is worried that I will hurt her. And though I would rather die a thousand deaths, it seems that I *have* hurt her.

“I kissed you because I could not stop myself, Jayla,” I tell her. “I knew that nothing had really changed between us, but I could not be so close to you without touching you.”

Jayla smiles sadly. “I get it. It’s ok, really.”

“It is not ‘ok,’” I tell her. “You are hurt.”

“Not exactly,” she says. “Or anyway, it’s not a new hurt. I just wish you could see what we have together as important, you know? As worthy of taking the next step.”

I curl my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching for her. “You say that now, but what will happen when one of us finds our pair-bond?” I ask.

“We’ve been over this all before,” she replies. “You don’t have to go through it again.”

“I want to make sure you understand that you matter to me,” I tell her. “You are important. I am not using you, or trying to trick you.”

“I know that,” she replies. “It’s just not enough for you. I’ll never be enough.”

Something deep inside me roars in frustration. Because the words she speaks feel wrong even as they are right. I want to grab hold of her and force her to hear me; force her to understand that I cannot let myself commit to her when I know that a magical bond to another might separate us at any time.

She bites her lip as she looks out the window at the station. “It looks like an atom that was hit by a million rocks,” she says.

“It does,” I reply.

“Funny to think someone on that hunk of junk is going to cut open my brain, right?” she says with a laugh.

My stomach twists. I look out at the station, wondering if we are really arriving at the right place.

The airlock opens and we step through onto the dark and dingy station. The lock slams closed behind us, and we hear the roar of engines as the transport rockets away without so much as a farewell.

“Good luck to you, too,” Jayla murmurs with a sardonic snort. “Nice guy, wasn’t he?”

“For someone in the service industry, he was not well-versed at people,” I reply.

At first, our new location seems even less welcoming than the transport ship. We walk down a long corridor. It has been scrubbed until it shines, but there is no sign of any life. The lights are low, and the station hums quietly.

“Maybe it’s nighttime here,” Jayla says in a hushed tone. “Seems like

the lights are pretty low.”

As if the ship hears her words, the light begins to increase until it is so bright that Jayla is squinting. Her eyes take a little longer to adjust to changes in light than mine. Perhaps that is why I notice the other person on the ship before she does.

I growl and push Jayla behind me as the figure barrels toward us. My fears calm as she gets closer and I realize she is a small human female with bright orange hair.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived!” she says, leaning forward to press her palms to her knees. “Just give me a second, I’m not much of a runner.”

Jayla steps forward and looks at the woman with interest. “I’m Jayla,” she says, holding out her hand.

The other female grins and takes her hand enthusiastically. “Nicky,” she says. “So glad to meet you. Doctor Julia called ahead and told us to be ready for you. The Doc already has your scans. He’s been pouring over them, trying to make a plan. Come on, I’ll take you over there.”

She beckons us to follow her down another corridor. The place is very confusing, and I find myself getting turned around several times.

“It can be hard to get used to the maze-ish-ness of this place,” Nicky says, as if reading my mind. “It helps to look at the numbers on the wall. I put them there myself to help me track where I am. The numbers go around the station from 1 to 12.”

“Like a clock?” Jayla asks.

I notice one of the signs Nicky mentioned, posted prominently on the wall of the hallway. It reads 3C. “What do the letters mean?” I ask.

“The letters tell you how far you are from the center of the station. We’re in C ring, which means we’re two rings out from the central core. You’ll get used to it.”

“Pretty smart, setting all this up,” Jayla says. “I like it.”

“Thanks. It’s less impressive than you might think. The system seems to confuse most of our guests, unless they come from Earth,” Nicky says. “Though at the same time, you’re far from the first human to visit. The Doc’s always complaining about Julia sending him referrals,

but I think he likes it, secretly.”

“He has treated other humans?” I ask.

“Some,” Nicky says. “There were the two sisters a few years back. I think you know them, Laurie and Clara?”

We nod.

“...But since then, we’ve gotten a bunch of women coming this way with complications, especially from microchips. The Sarta really did a number on the humans on Earth.”

I grunt in agreement. “I wish we were closer to a resolution with them,” I say.

“Me too,” Nicky replies.

She opens her mouth to say more, but before she can, a low rumbling voice roars, “NICKY!”

Jayla jumps, her eyes widening as she looks around for the source of the voice. I reach for my weapon, though I do not pull it. Nicky just rolls her eyes. “As you can see, we’ve almost arrived at the Doc’s office.” She leans closer to Jayla and whispers, “Don’t let him intimidate you. He’s a crotchety dick, no question, but he likes to solve problems. He’s gonna help you.”

“You know I can hear you, she-devil!” the voice shouts. “Just bring her in here.”

Nicky smiles. “I taught him that word,” she says proudly. “He loves human insults. Come on.”

Jayla hesitates, her eyes turning to me. I move closer and slide my arm around her shoulders. “Together?” I ask.

She smiles, though there’s a wobble in her bottom lip that makes my heart seize tightly. “Together,” she says, leaning against me.

We follow Nicky into a brightly lit office, where the Doc awaits.

Chapter Thirteen - Jayla



The Doc is a F'Reit. We don't see them all that much on Beshtast, but I'm getting better at identifying different species now that I've been out here awhile.

F'Reits are tall and broad with muscular frames. Their skin tones range from silver to gray. They have little ridges along the bridges of their noses, but otherwise, their facial features aren't that different to humans.

The Doc, as it turns out, is surprisingly handsome. Or he would be if he wasn't looking at me like I was a beast from the bowels of hell.

"Which one are you?" he asks sharply.

"Slow your roll, dude," Nicky says. "Stop being so gruff, you'll scare them. This is Jayla, she's your patient, and this is Frey."

"Another Xalke pair-bond couple, I take it," the Doc says. He looks at us with disgust, as if he expects us to start fucking right in front of him.

"No, actually," I say, squaring my shoulders against the hurt that rises in my throat. "Not bonded. Just friends."

I glance over at Frey and find him scowling at me. I glare right back. Where the hell does he get off being annoyed with me when we literally *just* talked about how we weren't bonded? Did he expect me to lie?

The Doc raises his eyebrows, looking back and forth between us. "You sure about that?" he asks. "Seem pretty bonded to me."

"I'm sure," I say in a louder voice. "Not bonded. Free as a bird, actually."

A low growl starts in Frey's chest, and I shoot him another contemptuous look. He seems to get the message because he stops growling and looks away.

"Absolutely," the Doc says. "Nothing between you two at all. I completely believe it."

“Are we going to stand around all day grilling them about their love lives?” Nicky asks.

The Doc’s eyes flare and he looks at Nicky with a furious expression. “I did not realize you had a busy schedule for the day, Nicky,” he growls. “Feel free to go back to your difficult task of scrubbing empty hallways.”

“Full time job, really,” Nicky spits back. “Especially since someone around here keeps messing them up.”

“They’re mine to mess up if I want to!” the Doc roars. He steps out from around his desk and walks toward Nicky. Frey steps forward, as if to block him, holding up a hand.

The Doc looks at him in surprise, and steps back with his hands raised. “I was not going to harm her,” he says.

“He really wasn’t,” Nicky says from behind us. “That’s just how we talk to each other.”

“Foreplay?” Frey asks, his voice tight.

The Doc’s eyes widen and he stares at Frey for a moment before shaking his head. “Of course not,” he says sharply.

“Not at all,” Nicky says at the same time.

“Nothing between you two at all,” Frey says, repeating the Doc’s words back to him. “I completely believe it.”

It takes the Doc all of ten minutes to determine that he needs new scans of my brain. He looks at the giant images on a large projection above his desk, shaking his head. I’m sitting on a hospital bed in his office, twiddling my thumbs nervously. I can hear Frey pacing the hallway outside.

“Typical Xalke bullshit,” the Doc mutters to himself, looking at the scans Julia sent along. “Missed all the important angles. How am I supposed to work with this?”

“Can you re-do the scans?” I ask, biting my nails nervously.

The Doc turns to look at me, and his eyes soften ever so slightly. “Of course,” he says gruffly. “Your doctor sent you here because she knows I do good work. Helped those two human friends of yours,

didn't I? And some other ones besides."

"Well let's get started," I say cheerfully.

The Doc shakes his head. "Better to do it in the morning," he says. "First thing. The scans will take some time to do. Lots of angles I need to make sure I find a path to this damned thing. Don't want you exhausted before we even start."

"I'm not exhausted," I protest.

The Doc gives me a knowing look. He steps closer to me and takes my hand between his own. "I know it is difficult to imagine sleeping another night without knowing your future," he says with surprising gentleness. "But it is my job to get the best results I can, and that will require you to stay perfectly still. The more tired you are, the harder it will be to get this right."

There's a clicking sound, and the door to the room opens. Frey's face appears in the doorway. He looks at me, and then drops his gaze to my hands, still joined with the Doc's. His eyes flare with anger, and he steps into the room with a growl.

"I thought you were going to run tests, not grope at her," he says to the Doc.

The Doc drops my hands and makes a gesture of surrender to Frey. "Not sure I would count holding hands with someone as 'groping' them, but perhaps your definition is altered by your feelings for Ms. Jayla."

I crack a smile at that. "Miz?" I repeat. "I haven't heard that one since I left Earth."

The Doc shakes his head. "Nicky's doing," he says. "She told me that females on Earth sometimes prefer Miz to Missus or Miss."

"We do," I say. "I mean, I do. Thank you."

"What is the difference between them?" Frey asks gruffly. "They sound almost identical to me."

"One means that you are wedded," the Doc says. "Another means you are unwedded. Ms. could mean either."

"So you prefer the one that does not signify your bonded status?" Frey asks, looking at me critically.

“Yes, I do,” I say. “Because my relationship status shouldn’t be part of my name.”

Frey mutters something under his breath.

“What was that?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says in a low voice. “Are you done here?”

“We are,” the Doc says. “I believe Nicky prepared you each a room on the far side of the central sphere. Rooms 8 and 9. Should be marked. She marked them so they would be easy enough to find. Scans first thing in the morning. No eating beforehand.”

“You got it, Doc,” I say, jumping down off the bed. “Oh, and...” I lean forward and kiss his cheek carefully. “Thanks in advance.”

The Doc sputters in surprise, and then a small smile spreads across his face. “You are welcome,” he says. “No more of that kissing stuff, though. Your beau here will have my head.”

“Oh he’s not my—”

Frey yanks my hand and pulls me out of the room before I can finish my sentence. He storms down the curved hallway, clutching my hand tightly in his own. He reaches the door marked ‘8’ and smashes his hand on the button to open it, pulling me inside and slamming it shut again.

“What the hell?” I ask, pulling my hand out of his. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?” Frey hisses. He grabs me by the shoulders and stares down at me with that intense expression. “Kissing him in front of me. Were you trying to make me jealous?”

I blink up at him, confused. “Was I trying to make you jealous by kissing the doctor on the cheek? No! I was thanking him. He seems like he’s alone a lot, and I thought he could use some affection...”

“Well if he wants affection, he can get it from someone else. You are not going to give him any more kisses, do you understand?”

When I don’t reply, he drops his arms from my shoulders and spins away from me, starting to pace the room. I watch as he rakes his hands through his hair. “You are driving me out of my mind, Jayla,” he mutters.

“I’m not sure why,” I say. “You told me we weren’t together. Actually, you’ve told me that more than once, even after fucking me several times. So I’m not sure where the hell you get the idea that you can order me to—”

Frey lunges forward and grabs me before I can finish. He pulls me tight against his chest with a rumbling growl. “You listen to me, Jayla. Pair-bond or no pair-bond, you are not going to go anywhere near that doctor again.”

His scent is masculine and intoxicating. I want to dip my head to his neck and breathe him in. Instead, I push on his chest hard until he lets me go.

“I’m not interested in the Doc,” I tell him. “You know as well as I do that there’s something going on between him and Nicky. I was giving him a thank you, that’s all.”

Frey blows out a breath. “You are right,” he says. “I apologize. I was just—”

“But at the same time,” I continue, “You have to get over this whole jealousy thing. Because you’re the one who decided you didn’t want to pursue this. And that means I’m free to be with anyone I like.”

Chapter Fourteen - Frey



Her words light a fire inside me. Before I can think better of it, I push her back against the wall hard. She lets out a little sound—something between a gasp and a moan. The sound only fuels me. I bury my face in her neck and breathe in deeply. I can feel her shivering against me. I can smell the traces of the Doc on her skin and it makes me crazy. I rub my nose along her jawline, trying to erase the other male's smell.

She is *mine*, I tell myself. Mine, and no one else's.

But before I can say the words aloud, I feel her cool palms on my chest, pushing me away.

"Don't start things you don't intend to finish," she says.

I back away, staring down into her eyes. They look up at me, open and honest. I see hurt there; hurt that I caused.

I sigh and turn away from her. "I am sorry," I say. "You are right, of course. I just... seeing you with the doctor..."

"You can't have it both ways," Jayla says in a soft voice. "I know you're trying your best not to hurt me, but this isn't the way. Tell me right now what you want from me."

"I-I don't know," I tell her. "You and I, we have a connection, there is no question in my mind. But..."

"It isn't the pair-bond," Jayla finishes for me.

"*Tak*," I reply.

"Nothing has changed, then," Jayla says, shaking her head. "We have to get away from each other. This thing between us, it's only going to hurt more as time goes on. You have to let me go."

Something primal inside me roars a denial, but I clamp down hard on my feelings. I nod sharply at her. "You are right," I say. "This needs to be the end." I start back toward my room, intending to leave her alone.

I put my hand on the knob and start to turn it. But at the last moment, I turn back to look at her. I freeze in place.

“Jayla,” I say through gritted teeth. “Your nose is bleeding.”

Jayla’s hand flies to her face. She touches the spot beneath her nose with delicate fingers. “Oh,” she says in a low voice. “Um, hold on.”

She starts toward the bathroom, but halfway across the room, she starts to stagger. I lunge forward and catch her before she hits the floor.

“Jayla? Jayla!” I shake her, slapping her cheek lightly. She does not wake. With a curse, I lift her into my arms. I hit the door mechanism with my elbow and run down the corridor, back toward the Doc’s chambers.

I find the exam room easily enough, but the door is open and I can tell it’s dark and empty. I race back down the hallway, bellowing for the Doc.

A door opens to my right, and I spin toward it eagerly, only to find Nicky staring back at me in blurry-eyed confusion. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Jayla. She is unconscious. I am not sure... I do not know what happened...”

“Ok, let’s get the Doc,” Nicky says. She steps out into the corridor in a long, flowing white dress. Her arms are bare as are her feet, and she must be freezing, but she races down the hallway beside me.

I appreciate the urgency, but the Doc does not. When we reach the door to the room where Nicky says he sleeps, she bangs on it with the flat of her hand.

“Doc!” she calls. “Get up! Jayla fainted.”

The door slides open moments later, revealing the angry and exhausted face of the F’Reit. His eyes find Nicky first, and he looks her up and down with a hungry expression. Nicky seems unaware of it, her eyes trained on Jayla.

“She had a nose bleed,” I say, following Nicky’s gaze to Jayla, who looks grey and ill. “And then she just... she just...” I trail off as the Doc leans closer. He touches Jayla’s forehead and then makes a noise in the back of his throat. “Meet me in the clinic in two minutes. I just need to change.” He turns to Nicky again. “As do you,” he says. “Can’t be out here in a damned scrap of fabric. Unprofessional.”

Nicky lets out a short laugh of surprise. “Unprofessional? To put a patient ahead of my own comfort? You’re right, of course. How could I be so short-sighted.”

She turns on her heel and storms back down the hallway. The Doc’s eyes follow her until she turns the corner and disappears out of sight. In a different time, I might ask him how he feels about her. I might be interested in hearing about their relationship, including how the hell they live together on this strange, near-silent station without killing or kissing each other.

But Jayla lets out a small moan in my arms, and my attention focuses back on her. I race back down the hallway toward the clinic, praying to the Goddess as I go.

The Doc arrives a short time later. He does a set of scans with a small instrument, running it up and down her limbs and then around her skull. Nicky disappears for a few minutes and returns wearing long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt with a tight, high collar. It is as if she went out of her way to find the most coverage she could. She gives the Doc a defiant expression before turning back to Jayla. She reaches out and takes her hand, pressing her palms against Jayla’s limp fingers as if to give her comfort.

“Anything?” she asks the Doc.

“Scans show a clot,” the Doc says shortly. “I will have to operate immediately.”

My stomach twists at his words. “Ze,” I say. “We did not... I did not...”

“Anything you have to say to her will have to wait until after the surgery,” the Doc says. “Right now, every moment that we spend standing here is a moment closer to her death. You can talk to her as I prep the space, but then I will need you to leave.”

He moves away from me and starts gathering tools with great speed and concentration. He barks orders at Nicky, and she moves around the room with the same efficiency.

I stand over Jayla’s unconscious form, staring down at her. Desperation beats deep in my veins. “Jayla,” I say tightly, “I will not pretend that things have always been easy between us. But... you have to live.”

I half-expect her to sit up and scowl at me for having the audacity to

give her orders, but her eyes remain closed, her lashes dusting over her warm cheeks. She looks so peaceful like this; as if she is just sleeping, and not deeply damaged. It feels horrific to stand over her, unable to help.

I wrack my brain, trying to remember what my last words to her had been. Something about her nose, more likely than not. And before that... before that, another rejection. One of many rejections I have offered her when I could have given her my damned heart.

And now I may never have the chance.

When the Doc and Nicky have finished preparing for the surgery, they push me out of the room and close the door. I am left standing in the empty corridor, staring into space, trying to comprehend what has happened.

A clot is never a good thing. I do not know much about the medical anatomy of human beings, but I know that their blood works much the same way as ours. If its flow is blocked, it will result in death.

My hands clench into fists as I imagine it. My sweet Jayla, who has never wanted anything from me but love and acceptance, dead.

Would it have been so hard to take a chance on a relationship with her? Would it have been so impossibly risky to give in to the feelings between us? Neither of our species had pair-bonds until very recently; who is to say that it is even a possibility for all of us?

I have wasted so much time, worrying about things that do not matter.

Feeling like a fool, I return to my room and sit down on the bed. My mind floods with memories of Jayla, her smile, her eyes, her lips, her skin. I try not to imagine the Doc cutting into her head. I try not to imagine that the next time I see her, those eyes might be dead and empty.

There is no question that waiting like this is the worst experience of my life.

It is hours before a knock sounds at my door. I rush forward and open it hastily. Nicky is standing on the threshold. She has circles under her eyes, and she sways from side to side as if too exhausted to stand up straight.

“She’s alive,” Nicky says with a deep sigh. “It was tough going there for a while, but your girl’s a fighter.”

The relief is so overwhelming that I sag against the doorframe. “Can I see her?” I ask. My voice is raw with emotion.

Nicky shakes her head. “Tomorrow, ok? The Doc wants to make sure she’s recovering well before he brings you in. Sleep. In the morning, we can talk more.”

“Of course,” I say. “Thank you.”

Nicky nods and walks away down the corridor, rubbing her eyes with her fists and yawning loudly. I close the door and return to my bed. Like there is any chance I might sleep.

By the time the morning comes, I have made a decision. Fuck the pair-bond, and fuck everything else. I am not going to wait another day to tell Jayla how I truly feel about her.

Chapter Fifteen - Jayla



I wake up with a hell of a headache. I groan and reach up to touch my head, only to have my hand snatched away.

“No touching yet,” says a growly voice.

I open my eyes to see the Doc standing over me, still holding my hand. He loosens his grip when I nod, and I lower my arm to my side.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Blood clot,” the Doc says. “Not an uncommon side effect of that tumor you had in your brain.”

“Had?” I ask hopefully.

The Doc’s mouth kicks up in a small grin before he smooths it out. “No more tumor,” he says. “We went in there and got it when we were fixing the clot.”

“It’s gone?” I whisper, shaking my head. “I can’t believe it. Are you sure?”

The Doc nods. “You have been asleep for some time. I ran my tests. No sign of the tumor anymore. Of course, we’ll want to monitor you for a while to make sure everything looks all right, but...”

“But I’m going to live?” I ask.

This time, the Doc can’t seem to stop himself from really smiling. “You are going to live.”

I let out a laugh. A loud one. My hand goes to my mouth, covering my giant smile. “Ow,” I say, beaming at him.

The Doc smiles. “I am sure laughter does not feel great right now.”

“It hurts,” I admit, “but it means I’m alive.”

“Well that’s the spirit,” the Doc says. He turns to check a computer monitor beside the bed. I watch him as his eyes scan the screen, and he nods with approval. He glances back at me. “Brainwaves look normal,” he says. “Well, normal for your species.”

“It’s hard to believe,” I say. I shake my head, and then groan as pain shoots through me. I reach up again, but then remember, and clench my hands into the blankets instead.

“I can give you something for the pain,” the Doc says. “Most likely it will make you sleep again, though.”

“Sounds good, let’s do it,” I say quickly.

The Doc chuckles. “Do you want to see Frey before you go back to sleep?”

Frey. My stomach tightens as I think of him. I’m sure he’s wracked with guilt about how things went between us. I’m sure he’s pacing the halls, waiting for me to wake up.

The Doc is studying my expression. “He will still be here when you wake up again,” he says. “No need to push yourself now if you think it might be upsetting. The question is, do you want to see him right now?”

Do I want to see Frey?

Of course, part of me always wants to see Frey. There’s something about him that draws me closer. Even when I hated him, I couldn’t help looking for him in every single crowd I passed. Any time he entered a room, my heart would skip a beat.

But I’m feeling like shit right now. Our last interaction, after all the closeness we had built together, was damned painful. I’m already in enough agony without being reminded of the fact that he doesn’t want me.

And now that I know there’s a chance I might live—a good one, if the Doc is to be believed—I want to focus on that happiness for a little while before I face the reality of a broken heart. Knowing Frey, he won’t lie to me even if I’m recovering from surgery. He’ll stand there and tell me that I’ll find my pair-bond soon enough. He’ll refuse to tell me what I want to hear.

It’s comforting, in a way. He’s honest to a fault, and it means I should always know where I stand with him... of course, honesty can also hurt.

“It seems like you’re going through a lot of thoughts here,” the Doc interrupts. “I thought it was a simple enough question, but maybe—”

“When I wake up, I’ll feel better, right?”

The Doc nods, studying me for a moment with interest. Then he turns and fishes a vial out of a drawer. I watch as he preps a medication and injects it into my neck. Warmth spreads through my body. My eyes roll back and my head falls onto the pillow. I can feel myself slipping into slumber. I cling to consciousness just long enough to conjure a memory of Frey. His body over mine as he slips inside me, fucking me as if I really belong to him.

If there is one last memory I want to experience, it’s this one. I let it wash over me until everything goes black.

When I wake up, it’s dark. We’re in a space station, so there’s no sunrise or sunset, but stations often have the lights on timers to simulate day and night. I’m alone in the room, monitors blinking around me in the quiet. I reach up and touch my head gingerly. The spot that aches the most is on my right side, just above my ear. I touch it carefully, feeling the lumpy stitches against my skin. My head is shaved on that side, and the texture of the shorn hair feels strange under my fingertips.

But I feel better. Not just better... lighter. As if the things that have been hanging over my head are finally resolved.

Except I’m urgently thirsty and hungry. It feels like I haven’t had anything to eat or drink in days, and maybe I haven’t. Since it’s the middle of the night, I imagine it’s possible no one will be in to check on me for a while. Which means I have two options: I can stay here and wait for someone to come by, uncomfortable, or I can forage for myself.

I disconnect the little monitor on my fingertip and slip out of bed. My feet are bare as I pad across the room to the door. The floor is made of some kind of textured metal, and though it’s cold, it feels surprisingly nice against the soles of my bare feet.

I press the button to open the door, and it slides to the side, revealing an empty hallway. It’s darker out here than it was in my room, and I blink as my eyes adjust. There are small glowing lights that line the hallway, so it’s not completely black.

I look one way and then the other, trying to remember the set up of the station. I remember a small cafeteria space, but I can’t remember

if it's to the right or the left. Taking a chance, I turn left and start down the corridor.

Two minutes later, I'm realizing my mistake. My body felt strong and healed when I first woke up, but I'm rapidly becoming fatigued. I stop for a moment, leaning hard against the wall and taking deep breaths of air into my lungs. My head is aching more now, and my legs feel shaky. I'm an idiot. I should have waited for the Doc to clear me before I went wandering the corridors on my own.

I glance back the way I came. I can't decide if I'd be better off moving forward and finding a place to rest and recover, or returning to my room without the food and water I need. I decide to press onward. At this point, I'll need to rest before I have the energy to go back. The cafeteria can't be much farther.

I keep a hand on the wall as I walk, trying to hold myself steady. Even so, I stagger slightly as I move forward. And then I see it: written in glow-in-the-dark paint on the door is the number 8. The room where Frey and I last saw each other. The room where he's probably sleeping right now. I could knock. I could hit the button and let myself in. He would probably be happy enough to see me, despite everything.

But instead, I keep going. I'm not ready to deal with him. I'm too physically exhausted to deal with the emotions I know he's going to dredge up. And emotionally...

I shake my head to myself and then groan. I need to stop doing that.

Suddenly I remember that our room was close to the cafeteria. I should only have to walk a few more doors down this seemingly endless hallway. With newfound energy, I hasten along. Soon I can see the glow of the cafeteria, where the lights are brighter.

I race inside, proud of myself for making it all the way here. Almost tripping over myself, I fill a glass with water and gulp it down greedily. Nothing has ever felt more fantastic. Then I grab a piece of fruit from a bowl on the counter and sink my teeth deep into the flesh. The sweet flavor bursts on my tongue, and I groan with delight. I wolf the fruit down in moments, and then drink another glass of water.

As soon as I finish it, though, exhaustion hits me hard. I think about the long walk back to my room, and bite my lip. I'm not sure it's a good idea for me to attempt to go all the way back right now.

There's a couch in the corner of the cafeteria. I grab another glass of

water and another piece of fruit, and head over there. As soon as I sit down, my body decides it's done. I let myself fall to the side, careful to lie down on the unstitched side of my head.

And I slide back into sleep.

Chapter Sixteen - Frey



I storm down the station's corridor. "Jayla!" I roar.

I had risen early and walked the short distance between our rooms. Since the surgery, I have tried to sit at her side as much as possible, though the Doc and Nicky have convinced me that sitting there all night is not useful.

But apparently it would have been useful, because now she has disappeared from her bed without any indication of where she might have gone. I hit the opener buttons on each door along the corridor, searching room after room. Nicky and the Doc are searching as well, of course. I can hear them in the distance, calling for her and squabbling with each other.

My mind returns, as it always does, to the way we left things before she collapsed. The horror of the words we spoke to each other. I would give anything to take back what I said to her. Even if she is not my pair-bond, she is mine, and I am hers. We can make a life together.

"Jayla!" I shout again. My voice echoes back at me, filling the silence of the ship for a moment before disappearing again.

I tromp into the cafeteria, my eyes scanning the room for signs of...

There she is. I stride forward, eating up the floor in desperate steps before falling to my knees next to her. She is asleep, the unshorn hair on one half of her head spread across the couch cushion. The evil stitches on the other side of her head look out of place against her smooth skin, a stark reminder of how easily I could have lost her.

"Jayla," I say softly. "Jayla, wake up."

She stirs with a small sound, and opens her eyes.

I reel back, stunned. The invisible rope that slams into my chest is more powerful than anything I have ever felt in my life. I stare up at her in shock, my jaw dropping open.

"How is this possible?" I ask, shaking my head.

"How is what possible?" she asks in a low voice. She sits up and stretches, her breasts pushing out against the white fabric on her

gown.

My cock hardens instantly. I ignore it, of course. She has already been through a massive surgery and she still needs to recover. But my body does not care. It demands closeness. It demands that I climb on top of her and...

"Frey? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Something like fear slakes up my spine. I get to my feet and then sit down on the couch beside her. "Do you feel this between us?" I ask. I take her hand in mine, feeling the rippling strength of the pair-bond as it beats between us like a heart.

She looks at me in confusion. "I feel the same way I always feel," she says.

I drop her hands in horror, and get to my feet. I turn my back to her and walk to the far side of the cafeteria. I pour a glass of water, my hands shaking, and bring it back to her side. She takes it from me with a grateful glance, and downs the liquid in large gulps.

"Thank you," she says as she hands the empty glass back to me. "I woke up and everything was dark, but I was so hungry and thirsty..."

"You could have woken me," I say tightly. "You went right by my room."

"I know," Jayla says softly. She looks up at me with an uneasiness that I cannot quite process. "I think I wasn't quite ready to face you."

Although I can understand what she means, it hurts. She should have felt comfortable coming to me. Knocking on my door should have been the easiest thing in the world for her to do. But at the same time, I understand. After what we did together, and the conversation that followed, she felt rejected.

"Jayla," I say in a low voice. "As soon as you looked at me, just now, I felt it."

"Felt what?" she asks, her brow wrinkled in confusion.

"The pair-bond," I say. "I felt it. I feel it. Between you and me."

Jayla's eyes widen. She stares at me for a moment. I can see her throat working as she swallows, her gaze filled with emotion. "What does it feel like?" she asks.

“Like a rope, tied between us,” I say. “It feels as if it is attached right here.” I touch the center of my chest. “It pulls me to you, urging me to get close to you.”

Jayla’s eyes drop to my chest. She reaches out and touches the spot I indicated, and then the same spot on her own body. She looks down at her own hand and laughs. It is not a happy laugh. It is a bitter laugh, filled with pain and sadness.

When she looks up into my eyes again, there is a resolve there that I do not like.

“I’ve felt that for you since the first time I saw you,” she says. “That tug in my chest. The pain when we’re separated. You’re saying you’re just feeling it now?”

“I am,” I say, reaching for her hand. “Of course I always liked you, Jayla, but this is different. So much more intense.”

Jayla makes a little noise in the back of her throat. She pulls her hand away from mine and stands from the couch. “I’m sorry, Frey,” she says. “It’s way way too late for this.”

I sit on the couch in shock, watching as she weaves her way out of the cafeteria and back into the hallway. It takes me a moment to recover, but then I jump to my feet and storm after her.

She is just reaching her room when I catch up to her. The Doc is waiting for her there. “Good morning,” he says with a small smile. “It is nice to see you up and moving around. Come now, let me examine you and make sure everything is as it should be.”

Jayla obeys, getting back into the bed. She pointedly ignores my gaze on her, focusing instead on the Doc. The bond between us pulses, pulling me closer. If I thought the connection between us was powerful before, it was nothing compared to what I feel now. Each time the Doc touches her, my stomach tenses. I have to hold myself back from racing over there and forcing him to back away from my mate.

My mate.

My mouth curls in a smile. After all this time spent torturing myself about Jayla, the obstacle is gone. I can make her mine. I can fill her with my children.

“Doc,” Jayla says quietly. “Is it possible that the cancer could have

blocked... a pair-bond?"

The Doc raises an eyebrow and glances over at me. "It is possible, of course," he says. "A tumor like that would have impacted your brain's ability to function normally. Don't know enough about pair-bonds to be sure, but I'd imagine that if something is wrong with your brain, it can impact your ability to execute a bond."

Jayla shakes her head. "Of course," she says.

"Are you saying that you feel a bond now?" the Doc asks.

"No," Jayla says slowly. "I'm saying that *he* feels it now. I felt it all along."

"Ah," says the Doc. He turns to face me. "That is unfortunate for you both, I imagine."

"Yeah," Jayla says sadly.

"Jayla," I say, starting toward her.

But she does not look at me. "I'm tired," she says to the Doc. "I'm going to sleep for a while."

"All right," says the Doc. "Next time, ring for someone when you wake up, ok? Here's the button, in case you forgot." He gives her a little device with a big blue button at its center. Jayla takes it with a quiet thank you, and then turns on her side, facing away from me.

I linger in the room until the Doc approaches me. "Can I speak with you outside?" he asks.

I want to say no; that I belong at my mate's side, but he might have important information to convey. I swallow hard, and turn away from Jayla. My body roars with discontentment, urging me to turn back into the room and climb into the bed beside her. I will not be content until my body is pressed firmly against hers.

Out in the hallway, the Doc crosses his arms over his chest and stares at me with a grim expression. "What happened?" he asks.

"As soon as I saw her, it was like a shock through my whole body," I say. "The connection was instantaneous."

"Are you sure it is the pair-bond?" the Doc asks. "Because if you are less than sure, you should stop talking about it. Jayla does not need to be going through heartache right now on top of everything else."

I look at the Doc in surprise. I have never heard him speak like this; he is always so gruff and harsh. It seems almost as if he is trying to defend Jayla against me.

A growl starts rumbling in my chest and I step closer to him. "She is *mine*," I say through clenched teeth. "You cannot keep her from me."

The Doc stares back at me coldly. "Don't give me that growling shit," he says. "It's my job to make sure Jayla heals properly. You could be an impediment to that. Especially if you're upsetting her the way you just did. So I'll ask again. Are you sure that this is a pair-bond, or are you just thinking with your dick?"

"It is the pair-bond," I say through gritted teeth. "I am sure."

The Doc sighs and touches the ridges along the bridge of his nose. "Not sure what happens now," he says. "But you need to give Jayla some space to process all of this."

I open my mouth to protest. The last thing she needs is space. She needs me close, working to convince her of my devotion.

But the Doc holds up a hand to interrupt me. "Put yourself in her position, Frey," he says. "Imagine that you had been feeling this intense bond the whole time, and the other person hadn't. How would you feel?"

I blink at him in horror. My mind flashes back through all the moments between Jayla and myself. The moments when she has kissed me, or how she clung to me when we made love. And then I remember my words afterwards. The way I spoke to her. I was trying to be honest, but the pain she must have endured as a result... it is almost too painful to imagine.

"What do I do?" I ask him.

The Doc shakes his head. "Don't know for sure," he says. "For now, give her space. Let her come to you. You owe her that."

I nod, and turn to go back to my room. The pair-bond screams inside me, urgently trying to pull me back toward Jayla. I struggle against the pain as I make my way to my room. I lie in my bed, staring at the ceiling. I put my hand over my chest where the pull between us throbs. I think about how long Jayla must have been feeling this pain; this deep and brutal agony.

And I wonder how I can ever make it right.

Chapter Seventeen - Jayla



It turns out that this station is actually pretty big, and there are lots of places to hide when you want to avoid someone. In the last few weeks, I've become really good at slipping into back corridors or down secret passages whenever I hear the stomp of a particular set of boots. When I do have to face him—he's waited outside my door a few times to talk to me—I manage to put him off by saying I need more time to recover.

It's not even a lie, really; I do need more time. I'm not sure there's enough time in the universe to help me to recover from what I've been through.

One morning, I decide to explore one of the outer rings of the station. Frey has been getting more persistent in his desire to spend time with me, and I need to put more distance between us. Nicky volunteers to accompany me, and we set out on our hike through the corridors of the station.

"How'd you get here?" she asks.

"What do you mean? I came with Frey."

"No," Nicky says. "I mean, why did you leave Earth?"

"Oh," I hesitate for a moment. "Well, that's a little bit of a long story."

"Never mind then," Nicky quips. "I don't have time to hear a long story while I wander through these junked up hallways." She gestures to a collection of boxes pushed against the wall. I've heard her fight with the Doc about stuff in the hallways. According to Nicky, it was way, way worse before she got here, and she still has to constantly move stuff to keep the corridors clear.

"I'm from Oregon," I start. "Really rural area."

"I've never been up there, but I hear it's beautiful," Nicky says, urging me on.

"It is," I say quickly. My mind immediately fills with the smell of the wild woods. The babbling of the brook that ran through our backyard. The feeling of mud squelching between my toes. "I loved growing up

there.”

“So why’d you leave?” Nicky asks.

I sigh. “My mom. She was... she was a wild person. She had me when she was twenty. Never knew who my dad was; just that he was a traveller, like her. On a whim when I was really little, she bought this big rambling piece of wild land. She didn’t have the money to build anything on it, so she and I lived out there in a trailer for years.”

“Sounds lonely,” Nicky says.

“It was, and it wasn’t,” I say. “We had each other. Or we did until I was about ten, anyway. Then my mom met this guy Gil.”

“Oh no.”

“He wasn’t so bad,” I say quickly. “He just... wasn’t interested in me, you know? And my mom, she got that he wasn’t looking to be my dad. She never pushed him to build a relationship with me. Now I look back and I think there are so many reasons she could have done that. Because she wanted to be the most important person in my life, or because she didn’t want me to rely on him... or because she didn’t want to lose him. I guess it would have been ok if things continued the way they had been.”

“But they didn’t?” Nicky guesses.

“Yeah they didn’t,” I say quietly. “Mom got sick. She died when I was fifteen. Cancer.” For the first time, I put together that she would have been about thirty-five when she died. Just a couple years older than me.

“Oh shit, Jayla, I’m sorry.”

“Gil sold the trailer to pay for her medical costs. I stayed with him for a while, but when I graduated high school and went to college, that was pretty much it. I was on my own.”

I stop and look out along the corridor for a moment. I can feel Nicky watching me, waiting to hear what I’ll say next. I’m not sure exactly what to say. That’s pretty much the story.

“What did you do for money?” she asks.

“Jobs,” I say. “Sales, retail, waitressing. I majored in anthropology, but never landed a job that really used the degree. I was living in DC

when I saw the thing about the Beshtast project. I thought... I guess I thought it would be an adventure.”

“Sure,” Nicky says gently.

“And also... maybe I thought I wouldn’t be lonely anymore, you know? That someone would... someone would put me first.” I swallow hard when a lump appears in my throat.

“I get it,” Nicky says.

“Enough about me,” I say, staring at my feet as we walk. “What about you? Where are you from?”

“Earth,” Nicky says with a shrug. “Minneapolis, to be specific.”

I raise my eyebrows at that. “I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard things...”

“They’re probably all true,” Nicky says. “The Sarta pretty much run the joint. I was in a bunch of experiments throughout my childhood. I was living in their labs before I came out here. All of us were.”

“Us?”

“Oh, I was with some other women.”

“Where did they go?”

“Well Corinne and Henrietta went to Beshtast,” Nicky says. She smiles softly as if remembering something nice. “They wanted to settle down, I think. And Jessie went with them to visit some friends. She plans to come back, but I guess we’ll see if that actually happens. She’s put off her return a few times already. I think she might have met someone.”

“Why didn’t you go with her? I mean for a visit to Beshtast. I would imagine this place gets a little stifling.”

Nicky sighs. “I guess I can see why you think that. To me, it’s the opposite of stifling. Always on the move. The idea of going to another planet, even for a little while...” she shivers a little. “I think I’d feel really trapped.”

I look around the close quarters of the corridor and raise an eyebrow. “And this doesn’t make you feel trapped?”

Nicky laughs. “I think that the boundlessness of space makes up for the crampedness of the station itself. Plus... it’s fun. Lots of new

challenges all the time.”

“The Doc seems like a challenge in and of himself,” I observe, looking at her out of the corner of my eye. I see her cheeks flush slightly.

“He’s a pain in the ass,” she says. “But he’s also really kind in his own way. And he saves people. People who wouldn’t have a chance without him.”

Enough beating around the bush, I think to myself. “What’s going on between you two, really?”

“What do you mean?” Nicky replies, her cheeks getting redder by the moment.

“I mean, I’ve never seen two people who weren’t together fight the way you two fight.”

“Well, we’re alone out here,” Nicky says defensively. “We have no one else to fight with.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me,” I say, holding up my hands. “But it seems like it might be more than that. Let me ask you this: what would you do if he made a move?”

Nicky hesitates for half a second and then gives me a cat-like smile. “I don’t think I’d mind,” she says finally.

I cock an eyebrow at her.

Nicky buries her face in her hands and screams into her palms in frustration. “Ok, ok. I’m crazy about him. But also he drives me crazy, you know? And he’s never shown any interest in me at all. Like, not at ALL.”

I snort. “I think he shows interest in you every day. Fighting with you is pretty passionate stuff.”

“We’ve been together on this station for more than five years, and he’s literally never touched me on purpose,” Nicky says.

“Far be it for me to judge,” I say. “Frey and I have been so up and down. And now this pair-bond thing... it’s only making things more complicated. The Doc told you about all of that, right?” I ask.

Nicky shakes her head. “He didn’t, and you don’t have to either, if you don’t want. It’s a personal thing, I know.”

“No, no, I’m happy to tell you. Maybe you can help me figure out what to do about it.”

I take a deep breath and walk her through our history. The way I always felt about him. The incredible pain of being constantly reminded that he didn’t feel the same way. And the weirdly painful realization that now he *does*, but it’s not enough for me to feel loved.

“Wow that sucks a lot,” Nicky says when I’m finished. “Like, a lot.”

“Thank you for saying that. Part of me feels like I should be so happy that he finally feels what I’ve been feeling that I should just fall into his arms. But it’s like, I wasn’t enough for him without the pair-bond. Why am I suddenly enough now? Just because there’s a weird connection between our brains? It feels wrong to pretend I don’t have any hangups about it.”

“Of course it does,” Nicky says. “You can’t pretend everything’s fine when it’s not.”

“I really can’t,” I say with a sad smile.

Nicky puts her hand on my shoulder for a moment. Then she pats me gently and steps back, putting her hands on her hips as she surveys our location. “So, what are we doing out here anyway?” She looks around at the corridor we’re walking through. It’s almost all made of metal, with a thin line for a window that runs through the whole ring. “Not very interesting, is it?”

“Yeah, I just needed to avoid Frey. Though you’re excellent company.”

“I get it,” Nicky says. “You can use me to avoid things anytime you like.”

Suddenly, the floor underneath us starts to shake. I look up at Nicky in alarm. “Does that happen a lot?” I ask.

“No,” Nicky says with worry in her eyes. “It’s never happened before.”

We walk to the wall and stand on our tip-toes to look out the narrow window.

“Everything looks fine on this side,” Nicky says, her voice tense.

We walk to the other side of the corridor, and look out again. This time, we’re facing in toward the central sphere of the station... and we can see the source of the disturbance. Two warships are lobbing fiery

projectiles at the sphere. Chunks of the sphere tear away from the station and hurtle out into space. Some of them strike the outer rings, causing them to shake.

“Fuck,” Nicky says. “Come on.”

She starts running back down the hallway toward the juncture point that lets us move between rings. I match her pace, running alongside her. “Who are they?” I ask.

“No idea,” Nicky says. “But they don’t seem like they’re happy with us, do they?”

Nicky and I run down the corridors toward the sphere, checking through the windows every few minutes. The two ships manage to dock against the sphere after several violent failures that create even more damage. Finally, they lock into place and we hear the alarms that indicate an airlock being opened.

“Do you recognize this type of ship?” I ask.

Nicky nods. “Trager, I think. But what could they possibly want from us?”

“I don’t know, but I think we better make a plan before we get back to the sphere.”

Nicky agrees, so we stop at a water spigot. We crouch in a dark corner, making sure to keep out of sight in case the invaders decide to send someone out looking for us.

So far, no indication of anyone hunting for us. That’s a good sign. It means that they might not know we’re aboard. But for all we know, Frey and the Doc are already captured—neither of us mention the possibility that they might be dead—so we’re on our own.

“We can use the ducts to get close,” Nicky says as she re-ties her shoelaces. “I doubt they know they’re there. Even the Doc doesn’t know about all of them.”

“And what do we do once we get close?” I ask. “Are we going to try to overpower them? I’m guessing that the Doc and Frey would tell us to hole up and hide.”

Nicky grins. “I’m sure they would, but that’s absolutely not what we’re

going to do, is it?”

“Well hell no,” I reply. “There’s no chance. But I also don’t know if we should assume that we can take them on.”

“We’ll need weapons, I agree, but I think we can do it. Plus, honestly, what choice do we have?”

“Fair point,” I mutter. I straighten my shoulders and take a deep breath. “Ok, I’m ready.”

Chapter Eighteen - Frey



If there is one good thing to come of Jayla avoiding me, it is that she is far away when the damned Tragers arrive. I sit next to the Doc on the floor in the middle of the bridge, our hands tied behind our backs as the Tragers toss things around. There are four of them: one young guard, two more senior-looking, and a leader. They appear to be searching for something, but they have not told us what.

The Doc is shockingly calm about all of this. In fact, his facial expression is so blank that at first I thought he might be having a breakdown of some kind. It took me some time to notice the slight sharpness of his eye movements. I recognize that look; he is watching for an opening; a weakness.

“If you tell us what you are looking for, perhaps we can help,” I suggest.

All four sets of Trager eyes snap to me. The leader slides closer, his long robes dragging across the floor of the ship. His eyes are yellow and watery against his pus-colored skin, covered in boils. He bares green teeth at me as he gets close.

“Could you now?” he says. He cocks his head to the side as he flicks his gaze back and forth between me and the Doc. “I think you know even less about this station than we do, stranger.” He turns his attention to the Doc. “This is the one who lives here. This is the one who knows where things are hidden.”

The Doc stares back at him without a trace of emotion. “What is it that you are looking for, friend?” he asks.

The leader straightens up and glances back at his crew. All of them shake their heads, as if to indicate that they have not found what they were hunting for.

“All right,” the leader says. “We are searching for a young woman.”

“A Trager?” the Doc asks.

“No,” the leader snaps.

“What species?” the Doc asks.

“Human,” the Trager growls. “Of course human. What females cause more trouble in this damned universe than the humans? A Trager female would know better than to cross us...”

“How did she cross you, exactly?” the Doc asks. “And what would she be doing here?”

“We have reason to believe that we injured her in our last... skirmish,” says the leader. “We were nearby. This is a known medical facility. It would make sense that she would come here.”

“Did she have a ship?” I ask.

The leader’s eyes narrow at me. “A shuttle,” he says.

“Well as you know from personal experience, it is very difficult to dock with this station, even when you have a full ship at your disposal,” I say. “I am not sure she would be able to accomplish it on her own. Especially not without us noticing.”

“You do not know this female,” the leader growls. “She is... innovative. Creative. And nothing if not sneaky.” He turns to face his group and points at them, barking orders in a Trager language I do not recognize. The Tragers bow to their leader and leave the bridge. We can hear them in the distance, pulling panels out of the wall and smashing things.

“She is not here,” the Doc says. “But if she were, I promise you I would not tell you.”

The leader cracks a smile, showing his rotting teeth again. “I know this,” he says. “Which is why we will tear this station apart before we give up.”

Before he departs to search for himself, the leader assigns the young guard to watch us. The younger Trager seems concerned about his ability to complete the task. His grip on his weapon is just a little too tight, his movements a little too panicked and jerky.

I glance at the Doc, but he seems focused on the doorway, as if listening for the others.

“Where are you from?” I ask the young guard in Pan-Un.

His hands tighten on his weapon. “None of your business,” he hisses.

“That is fair,” I say with a shrug. “I was just trying to understand how

you got caught up with a human of all species. They do not tend to visit the Trager worlds very often unless forced.”

The young guard hesitates a moment and then says, “She was a slave in the main city. Her owner sold her to a work planet outside the Nebula. We were transporting her when she decided to...”

“Greetyuk! You are not talking to them, are you?” came a voice from down the corridor.

The young guard pressed his lips together and glared at us. “No,” he calls back. “Of course not.”

“They will trick you if given half a chance. Stick to your job and leave the rest to us.”

The guard mutters under his breath, turning his back to us to look out the window.

As soon as his eyes move away from us, I feel the Doc’s hands pulling at the ropes around my wrists. He loosens them just enough that I can slip my hands free before moving back to his position.

The young guard glances back over his shoulder, seemingly unaware of the Doc’s actions. I feel better now that my hands are free. It is only a matter of time before we liberate the station from the Tragers and send them on their way.

I glance over at the Doc, but his gaze is overhead, staring at the duct work above the young guard. His jaw tightens and he turns to face me. “When the time comes, take the leader. I’ll get the other two.”

I nod sharply, though my heart is starting to pound louder in my chest. I have a terrible feeling that I know why the Doc is staring at the ducts.

Moments later, my fears are realized when a flap in the ducts falls open, and two human figures leap down to the floor of the bridge.

Nicky shoots the young guard with a stunning device before he can sound an alarm. He falls to the floor with a quiet grunting sound, his body twitching and his features contorted in agony. Nicky spins to face us and throws a gun to the Doc, and then one to me.

Jayla stands behind Nicky, her expression determined and her body tense. She is holding a weapon similar to ours, her hand trembling slightly as she grips it tight in her fist.

The Doc signals that I should move in on the leader, but I hesitate. Leaving Jayla behind no longer feels possible. My body rebels at the idea of leaving her unprotected.

With a silent roll of his eyes, the Doc grabs Jayla's arm and pulls her forward until she is at his side. I start forward, a growl rising in my throat, but then the Doc pushes her against me. I catch her in my arms, pulling her tight to my chest. She stares up at me. I can feel the pull inside me, the satisfaction of feeling her against me warms my heart. I want to pick her up and carry her away from here. I want to show her exactly how much she means to me.

The Doc clears his throat softly and gives me a look. Right. The Tragers first, seduction later. I can do that. Nicky comes to stand next to the Doc and they whisper to each other, pointing at the entrance to the bridge and around the room. From their demeanors, it seems likely that this is not the first time they have been boarded.

It makes sense; this place is vast and underguarded. They would be far better off if they kept some security here. But considering that the Doc is barely willing to tolerate Nicky's presence, I suppose it is unsurprising that they do not have anyone else living here.

I take Jayla's arm and start to lead her down the hall. She pulls away from me, opening her mouth to protest, but Nicky lets out a low hiss. Realizing that she cannot yell at me without alerting our enemies, she presses her mouth closed again.

She gives me a cold look and nods, indicating she will follow me. Relief fills my chest, and I start down the hall in pursuit of the Trager leader, my pair-bond at my side.

Chapter Nineteen - Jayla



My body is a damned traitor. It sighs happily at being so close to Frey again, even though anger fills my chest and resentment stirs in my belly. I follow him down the hallway, my eyes open and my ears perked for any sign of the intruders.

Almost immediately, one of the Tragers jumps out from around a corner, gun pointed at us. He lets out a shout as he sees us, and I fire my weapon. He drops to the ground, his eyes bugged out as he shakes with tremors from the shock running through his body. Stunning is no joke, it seems. He lies there, writhing in silent pain, as shouts erupt farther down the corridor.

“Come on,” Frey says in a tense voice. He grabs my hand and pulls me into a darkened alcove. There we wait for the others to appear, the sound of our breathing synching in the stillness around us.

“I should tell you, Jayla...” he murmurs out of nowhere.

“Don’t tell me anything,” I snap. “We’re in the middle of a damned space battle.”

“If I die, I want you to know. I always felt something for you. Always. It was just...”

“Yeah I know, it was just not *as much* as it could be.”

The young guard appears from the bridge. Apparently the stunning device wears off fast. He runs toward his fallen comrade. We both raise our weapons, but this time Frey fires first. The Trager falls forward on top of his friend, shaking, his mouth curved in a soundless scream.

I glance at Frey for a moment before looking back down the hall. “Look, I get it, you thought there was something more out there for you. But news flash, bucko, that’s not how relationships work. You can’t always be looking for something greater.”

“We got one!” the Doc calls from somewhere on the ship. “Only the leader is left now!”

“What did you expect me to do, exactly?” Frey asks. “I did not feel

what I was supposed to feel. Should I have lied to you, knowing that there might be a pair-bond female out there waiting for me? Knowing that I might need to break your heart if I found her?"

"No," I say with a sigh. "You were supposed to care enough that it didn't matter if we were bonded or not."

Nicky's voice echoes through the halls. "Incoming!"

Seconds later, the final Trager—the leader—comes racing down the hall, a look of determination on his face. His eyes flick to his compatriots in their pile on the floor, but he spots us before we can get him, and dodges around the corner. He starts firing at us, the energy beams bouncing off the sides of the alcove. A few come close to hitting me, and Frey curses.

"Get back, Jayla," he barks.

"How will that help you, exactly?" I snap in reply as I duck down and keep firing.

This Trager is far better at all of this than his minions. He seems to move like lightning from one position to another, his shots hitting close to their targets each time. I don't know where the Doc and Nicky are, but we could definitely use their support here.

As if I have conjured them, we hear their shouts in the distance. Flashes of light start to appear as they fire at the Trager. He turns to fire back, and I take advantage, shooting him in the back with my stun gun. Like the others, he shakes and starts to fall. I get to my feet, thinking it's over.

But before he falls, the Trager spins around to face us and fires one more time. Everything happens in slow motion. The beam of light comes toward me, about to strike me in the chest, when out of nowhere, Frey jumps in front of me, taking the shot in the lower left of his abdomen. He groans as he falls to his knees and then down on his right side, gripping his wound. The Trager is finally down, his gun skittering across the floor as he loses his grip.

There's a moment of silence as we all realize what has happened. Then with a curse, I crouch beside Frey to examine his injury. Dark blood pours from his stomach, pooling on the metal floor of the space station. The Doc and Nicky race toward us. I look at Frey's face and find it grey and drawn. He blinks at me for a moment and then closes his eyes. His body goes limp just as the Doc reaches me.

“Damn,” he whispers. “Help me. I need to get him somewhere I can examine him.”

Nicky and I help the Doc get him to his feet, and we stumble through the station to an exam room. As soon as we lie him down on the table, he tries to shoo us out.

“You need to get the Tragers off the station before they wake up,” he says. “And I need silence to work on this.”

“But Doc,” I say. “Will he be ok?”

“Standing here talking only makes bad things more likely,” he says gruffly. “Go.”

Nicky pulls on my arm and gives me a steely eyed look. “It’ll take your mind off it,” she says. “And keep us from being murdered. Win, win.”

“Ok,” I murmur, glancing back over my shoulder as I let Nicky draw me out of the room.

I follow her as she strides past the bodies and down the corridor onto one of the invading warships. She looks down at the airlock and shakes her head. “This one is in pretty good shape,” she says. “Let’s check the other one.”

She walks down the hallway and around a corner to a second docking station, where the second warship has docked. As soon as she sees it, she nods. “This one,” she says. “See how they damaged their ship trying to dock? We’ll keep the other one for ourselves. Might come in handy.”

She keeps up a steady stream of conversation as we get to work dragging the four Tragers back to the ship and throwing them inside. She takes one arm, I take the other, and together we drag the first body down the hall.

“This isn’t the first time this has happened,” she says. “The first time was probably two months after my friends left for Beshtast. I was alone here with the Doc, and I woke up to the sound of shrieking metal. Turned out it was some scrappers looking for an easy haul. They didn’t like it much when they found out that me and the Doc were still here.”

We drop the first Trager’s body on the floor of the ship’s cargo bay, and then the second one beside him. When we return, dragging the youngest guard, I can hear at least one of the Tragers groaning. Before

I can say anything, Nicky reaches for her gun. She stuns each of them in turn, their prone bodies shaking on the floor. She glances over at me as we make our way back. "Can't be too careful," she says.

We reach the spot where the leader should have been, but his body's gone.

"Damn," Nicky says, looking around. "Come on, we gotta find him."

"You will not need to look far," a voice snarls from the darkness.

We both spin around just as he shoots. I watch in horror as Nicky is knocked backward, clutching her shoulder and biting back a curse. I fire my own weapon three times. It's set to stun but as the Trager falls, he hits his head on the edge of a piece of machinery sitting in the corridor. I watch as his expression changes from pain to blank death in an instant. As a puddle of black blood forms on the ground, I run to Nicky's side.

"Shit, Nicky," I say, putting pressure on her shoulder.

"It's fine," she growls, pushing me away.

"But—" I reach for her shoulder again, but she pulls away hard.

"I said it's fine. You want to tell the Doc I'm injured while he's still working on Frey?"

I hesitate for a moment. The Doc has been growly and gruff with Nicky since we arrived, but no one can live in such close proximity to someone and not feel something for them, even if that something is just friendship. ...And I have a feeling there's something even bigger between Nicky and the Doc.

So if we tell him that she's hurt, will he re-prioritize? Will he leave Frey to die so he can treat Nicky?

I grab one of the leader's arms, intending to drag him back to his ship, but Nicky waves me off. "He's fine there. Can't hurt us anymore. We shouldn't waste the time on him."

Without looking back at me, she turns and practically runs back onto the enemy ship, speeding past the pile of unconscious Tragers and through its corridors. I follow behind her, wrinkling my nose at the stale air of the smaller ship. Tragers aren't known for their hygiene, and a ship that had them closed inside for however long? It's pretty rank.

I'm also trying not to panic as I watch blood spreading from Nicky's shoulder down her back. She has to be in unbelievable pain, but she's moving as if there's nothing wrong. She's murmuring to herself about tasks she wants to complete as she weaves her way through the ship's corridors.

"Do you know where you're going?" I call out to her.

"Not really," she says in a strained voice. "But the bridge is usually at the front of the ship, and since the docking point was in the back... ah, there it is." Nicky reaches the bridge and immediately races to a computer monitor, typing in commands.

"How the hell are you doing this?" I ask. "Not only should you be unconscious, but you seem to know how to speak some Trager language now?"

"Oh no, it's in Pan-Un. Most ships take Pan-Un commands, even if the monitors show something else. Safety protocols. See, now, we have five minutes to get out of here before the ship launches." She presses one last key and spins around to face me.

I realize her mistake at the same time she does. Her face pales, and she staggers toward me.

"Shit," she says, as her legs give out.

I catch hold of her and throw her uninjured arm over my shoulders. "Come on," I say. "Stay with me now."

I practically carry her down the hallway. I'm trying to count the seconds as they pass, unsure how much more time I'll have before the doors will close on us, trapping us on this ship with the people whose leader I just killed.

I'm nearly to the airlock when I stumble under Nicky's weight. She's completely passed out now, hanging off of me. To my horror, I can hear the whir of the doors, as if they are about to close. Panicking, I push Nicky forward through the doorway. She lands heavily on the floor. I jump through the doors, landing beside her just as the locks slam shut. I can hear the rattling and screeching of metal as the ship undocks from the station, and floats away into space.

I lie there for one more minute, catching my breath, before I get to my feet and check on Nicky. She's passed out, lying at a horrible angle, and for a moment my stomach lurches. Is she dead? I'm relieved when I hear her groan.

“Fuck that hurts,” she hisses.

“Nicolina?” a voice shouts from a distance. I’m surprised when the Doc sprints into sight, his eyes wild. He follows my gaze to the floor. When he sees her, he lets out a thunderous scream and races forward.

“She’s alive,” I say as fast as I can. The Doc scoops her up in his arms and starts down the corridor.

“What happened?” he barks over his shoulder at me.

“The leader of the Tragers... he came-to. He shot her before I could... could...” I swallow hard, unable to finish my thought. I’m not ready to process that I killed someone, not really.

“I saw his body in the hall,” the Doc says, almost sympathetically. “That is why I came to find you. What about the others?”

“Gone,” I say, running to keep up with him. “Nicky got the thing moving before she passed out.”

The Doc curses and then glances back at me. “Why did she not... never mind. I know why. Damn it, Nicolina.”

“Is she going to be ok?” I ask as we reach another exam room.

“Yes,” the Doc says without hesitation. “She has to be.”

I watch from the doorway as he places her carefully on a bed. “Doc, I know it’s not a good time but...”

“Go see for yourself,” he snaps without taking his eyes off Nicky. “I finished with him before I left to find you. He’s fine.”

“Thanks,” I say softly. I close the door and walk down the hall, my heart pounding as I move toward Frey’s room.

Chapter Twenty - Frey



I wake up feeling like hell. I try to sit up but a sharp pain pierces my abdomen.

“Don’t try to move,” a soft voice says from my side.

I open my eyes to find Jayla beside me. “Jayla,” I say hoarsely. “What —?”

“You jumped in front of me when I was about to be shot,” she says. “Do you want some water?”

“*Tak*,” I reply. “Please.”

She nods and gets to her feet, walking across the room to pour water from the small sink in the corner. As she walks back over, I notice that she looks as if she hasn’t slept in days. She is still wearing the same clothes she wore when last I saw her, but time must have passed since I was injured; a night at least, if not more.

I take the glass from her hands and drink greedily, swallowing gulp after gulp of cool liquid. Jayla takes the glass from my hands when I finish, and carries it back over to the sink. When she returns to sit beside me, I thank her again.

“It’s fine,” she says with a smile. “Glad to help. It’s good to see you awake.”

“Where are the others?” I ask.

“Nicky was hurt too,” she says, her brow wrinkling with concern. “The Doc has been with her since it happened. I’ve tried to get in to see her, but he won’t let me near. Keeps muttering about infection.”

“But he is fine with you sitting here with me?”

Jayla smiles. “I think he’s less protective of you than he is of Nicky.”

“Are they...?”

“I don’t think so, actually,” Jayla says. “But I think there are a lot of feelings there.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

“Just the way they talk to each other,” Jayla says with a shrug.

“They talk to each other as if they are sworn enemies.”

Jayla laughs at that, and her eyes sparkle in a way that makes my chest tighten. “Well, I guess that’s true in a way,” she says. “But I think they’ve been through a lot together. Even if they won’t admit it, I think they’re in love.”

“You have had a lot of time to think about this,” I say.

“Not that much time. A couple days.”

“Is that how long I have been sleeping?” I ask.

“Oh you woke up a few times before this,” Jayla says. “I managed to get you to eat some broth and drink some water every few hours. But you’ve been really out of it before now. I’ve been keeping up with your pain med regimen, as the Doc requested.”

“You have been taking care of me,” I say softly.

“Of course,” Jayla replies. “What did you expect? That I would just leave you alone to die while I sat in the other room eating bon bons?”

“What are bon bons?”

“Never mind, that’s not the point. Just because I’m not sure where things stand with us doesn’t mean I would let you die or lie here in pain.”

“You are not sure where things stand with us?” I ask. My heart beats a little harder. Being unsure is a good thing for Jayla; it means she is considering her options. It means I am still a possibility. I will do anything I can to change her mind and make her realize she should be mine.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Jayla says, pointing at me. “We can talk about it when you’re better.” She moves to stand up but I catch her hand and pull her back toward me. She looks down at me in surprise, but does not pull away. I press my lips to the back of her hand. Her breath hitches, and I feel myself harden at the sound. Apparently my injury is no match for the pair-bond.

“If we will talk when I am better, I will work hard on healing,” I tell her.

She swallows as she pulls her hand out of mine slowly. I can see the flush on her cheeks. I can practically hear the beating of her heart. She wants me still. It is all I can ask for. It is all that I need.

Jayla stays with me for hours. She brings me food and helps me change the bandages on my injury. I am impressed to find it healing nicely. Xalkes usually do not have trouble recovering from muscle wounds, but stomach injuries always raise concerns because our organs are fragile and hard to repair. The Doc has apparently done an excellent job.

But it still hurts so badly that I fear I may vomit. Although I do not say anything, Jayla brings me another dose of painkillers after I eat. “The Doc said that when you first woke up, you’d be in a lot of pain,” she says. “You need to stay on top of your pain management to avoid real suffering.”

I take the pills gratefully, and a short while later, I start to feel myself fading. I try to hide the fatigue, but all too soon, Jayla points to my heavy eyelids and says, “Ok, it’s time for you to sleep.”

I nod and let her help me to lie back down on the bed. It hurts, and Jayla whispers an apology as if it is somehow her fault. I am starting to slip into sleep when I find myself grabbing for her hand again.

“Jayla,” I say urgently. “Before you go...”

“We can talk about it later, Frey, I promise,” she says tiredly.

“I need to say this now,” I tell her, though I can hear my speech slurring. This is important. I should not have kept it from her. I should not have pretended...

“What is it, Frey?” Jayla asks.

“What scared me about the pair-bond... the reason I hesitated,” I say. “It was not because I thought I would meet someone else. I could never imagine loving anyone as much as I have loved you from the moment we met.”

Jayla’s hand stills in mine.

“It was the fear that *you* might find someone else, Jayla. Someone with whom you might bond. If you did... if you cared for someone else... I did not think I could survive it.”

“Frey...” Jayla says softly.

“I know it is too late,” I say before she can finish. “And I know that you will not reject me when I am lying here like this, even if that is what you want to do. So just think about it.”

“Frey, God... what am I supposed to do with that?” Jayla asks.

I smile and then laugh. “These drugs are fantastic,” I reply.

And then I slip into slumber.



I try to sleep but it doesn't take. I toss and turn for a few hours, but eventually I wind up pacing the floor of Frey's recovery room, throwing him every dirty look I can muster. He's so drugged up he wouldn't feel lasers if they shot out of my eyes, but it makes me feel better. How dare he? How dare he tell me these things when he's lying in bed, hurt?

"He was probably just high," I mutter to myself. "He didn't mean it."

But a little voice in the back of my head wonders if maybe he had meant it. If I chose to believe him, would we be together the way everyone else was? Would we build a life together? Would I have our babies and live a life filled with love and family?

I ball my hands into fists and pace even faster. Everything is so damned confusing. I don't want to throw away my chance at happiness, but I also don't know if I can risk my heart on someone who has pushed me away time and time again. What would our story sound like to someone outside of the two of us? Boy meets girl, boy fucks girl, boy decides girl isn't bond-partner-y enough, girl meets brain cancer...

The whole thing is too exhausting to even run through.

There's a quiet knock at the door, and I stop pacing long enough to open it. Nicky is on the other side, her arm in a sling. "Hi there, stranger," she says cheerfully.

"Nicky!" I say. "God I'd hug you if I didn't think that would hurt."

Nicky cringes. "Yes, please no hugging for now. The Doc finally fell asleep in the chair by my bed, and I staged a prison break. Any interest in a sneaky snack in the mess?" She wiggles her eyebrows, and I laugh.

"There is nothing that would make me happier," I say. I glance back at Frey, and feel a momentary hesitation; the idea of leaving him for even a moment is almost painful. But he's drugged up, and probably won't move again for another ten or twelve hours, if the last few doses are any indication.

Plus, I could use a sounding board, and Nicky is the perfect candidate.

We get settled in the mess with bags of something that's kind of like a cross between a chip and dried seaweed. I listen while Nicky complains about the Doc's protective side for a while, until she settles into her chips with a frustrated sigh.

"Maybe he cares about you," I say. "Has that occurred to you?"

Nicky blushes and stares down at her chips. "If he did, why wouldn't he have said something by now? We've been working alone together on this station for ages. It seems to me that if he wanted me, he would have jumped me by now. It's so frustrating, being close to him and wanting him, knowing he doesn't want me back."

"Well... why don't you do something about it?"

Nicky's smile fades. "Come on. You've seen how hard he is on me when we're being friendly. Can you imagine how painful his rejection would be? And then what, I'd have to leave here?" She shakes her head. "Not worth the risk." She reaches into her chip bag and examines one of them before popping it into her mouth. "What about Frey? What are you going to do about all of that?"

I blow out a breath. "Funny you should ask," I say, "because some shit has gone down in that department."

I fill Nicky in on Frey's drugged confession, watching her face closely for signs of her thoughts. Her forehead stays smooth, and her mouth focuses on the crunch of her chips. I can't tell what the hell she's thinking. "Well?" I say finally. "What the hell should I do?"

"Well, what do you want to do?" Nicky asks evenly.

I blink at her for a moment. I'm not sure how to respond to that. What do I want, really? Out of all of this? "I guess... I guess I want Frey to want me as much as I want him."

"And he does now, right?" she asks.

"Yeah, but..."

"But it didn't happen the way you wanted it to," Nicky finishes for me.

"It's more than that," I protest. "I'm not punishing him here. I just... I'm not sure I can trust it."

"Has anyone else ever gone back on a pair-bond once it took hold?"

From what I hear, it's pretty much a done-deal once it happens."

"Sure, but no one else has ever taken so long to get the pair-bond going," I counter. "And there aren't that many human-Xalke couples yet. There are going to be anomalies. I know that I want to be with him, but the idea of losing him makes my heart ache. It just doesn't feel quite right, you know?"

Nicky nods. "I get it. Things not feeling right, I mean. Love is tough. It's not as simple as we might want it to be."

I raise an eyebrow at that. "Are you speaking from experience there?"

Nicky laughs. "No, actually. I've never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend or anything like that. The Sarta tried it with me, but it just didn't go anywhere. That's another thing that worries me about the Doc. He's so... experienced."

"He is? With whom? There's no one around here."

"No, not now, but when we first got here, he mentioned that he'd had women... sexy working women... here before." Nicky's cheeks flame as red as her hair. "No judgment, of course. He's allowed to do what he wants, and so are the women."

"But you're jealous," I say.

"Maybe a little," she says, ducking her head. "But that's not the point. The point is, we're talking about you and Frey, and what you're going to do when he wakes up."

I groan and put my head down on the table. "I don't know the answer to that," I tell her.

We both hear the Doc clearing his throat at the same time. Our heads snap around to stare at him where he is standing in the doorway, looking uncomfortable. "He's awake," the F'Reit says, his eyes not meeting ours. "Asking for you."

I get to my feet and give Nicky a pointed look before heading down the hall to Frey's room.

He's sitting up and waiting for me when I arrive. "Jayla," he says, nodding to me when I enter. His eyes are serious, and his expression is grim. A rush of panic floods through me. Is he about to tell me that he doesn't want to be with me? That everything he said was a drug-induced nightmare?

I slide into a chair at his side and fold my hands in my lap, staring down at them. "How are you feeling?" I ask tentatively.

He lifts his shirt and shows me a clean injury with black stitches crossing through it.

"It looks much better than it did yesterday," I say. My tone sounds stiff to my own ears; not nearly as relieved as I feel.

Frey grunts and lowers his shirt again. "Jayla, about what I said yesterday..." He trails off and silence surrounds us. I glance up to find him staring at me with an unreadable expression.

"Yes?" I prompt. I can't stop myself from holding my breath. Is he going to take it all back?

"I was drugged, it is true, but I meant every word," he says. "All of it."

He reaches out for my hand. I hesitate for a moment and then lay my hand in his. I blow out the breath I was holding, more relieved than I'm willing to admit.

"I am so sorry, Jayla. I have been a coward. And I deserve whatever punishment you decide I deserve. But I cannot stand the idea that you might not know how much I have always loved you."

I feel the tears flooding my eyes, and I can't stop them. Two big fat ones slide down my cheeks as I stare at Frey, his heart in his eyes. "I want to believe you," I say in a croaking voice. "I want to think... I want to think we could be together."

Frey's breath hitches and he groans at my words. He leans toward me and then curses and clutches his side. "Damn it," he hisses. "That hurts."

A small laugh slips from my lips. I get to my feet and step toward him, tentatively. "I can help with that," I say softly.

Frey's eyes burn as he stares at me. He watches as I lean closer, careful to keep my hands behind my back so I don't risk leaning on his injury. I move my face toward his. My heart pounds in my chest. I want to kiss him so badly, but I'm also terrified that he'll stop me for some reason. It's not logical; he just said he wanted me.

I guess old habits die hard.

My lips touch his, softly, gently. He lets me take control for a moment,

kissing me back but letting me lead. But when my tongue flicks out and touches his, he growls. His hands lift to cup my cheeks and he takes control, sliding his tongue between my lips and slanting his mouth over mine.

My eyes close and I give in. I let myself feel the intensity of his desire for me. I kiss him back as hard as I can. My tongue moves against his, massaging it, teasing it. I nip at his lips, I suck on his tongue. I bring my hands around and let one of them run over his uninjured side, all the way down to his cock, which is tenting the blankets of the bed.

He breaks the kiss just as I wrap my hand around him. "Fuck, Jayla," he hisses, throwing his head back. "We need to stop."

"Why is that?" I ask, as I move my fist along his shaft. The fabric between my hand and him doesn't stop me from getting a tight grip on him, and I feel him shudder as my fist tightens.

"Because I cannot claim you as I want right now," he says tightly. "And I do not deserve—fuck, we cannot do this right now," he breathes.

"Do you really want me to stop?" I ask, still moving over him. "I will. All you have to say is, 'Jayla, please stop touching my rock hard cock.' And I will."

"Jayla," Frey starts.

"Yes?" I ask. I trail my hand away from his cock and up to the top of the blankets, pulling them down. I let my fingers trace along the hem of his shirt and then slip beneath the waistband of his pants. My body trembles as I touch him, flesh to flesh.

"*Fuck*," he says, his head falling back. "Fuck, Jayla, that feels incredible."

I smile to myself as I move my hand faster. He pants, his eyes squeezed shut, and he lifts his hips to try to pump into my hand... only to slump back in frustration, grabbing his side. "Shit," he says.

I stop for a moment. "Did you hurt yourself?" I ask, concerned. "I can stop, for real..."

"Do not," he grinds out. "Please."

"Do you promise not to hurt yourself?" I ask.

"Tak, I will promise you anything you want," Frey says through clenched teeth.

I reach back inside his clothes and circle the tip of his cock with my fingers. "Do you promise to stay still?"

"Tak," he pants.

I pull the hem of his trousers lower and release his cock. It springs up toward me, rock hard with precum glistening at its tip. I lean forward and carefully lick it clean. His breath catches in his throat and he lifts his hips again.

I back away immediately and he growls in frustration.

"You moved," I warn him. "That's strike two."

Chapter Twenty-two - Frey



Her mouth moves against me. It is the most incredible feeling, and I squeeze my eyes shut, my hands gripping the sheets of the bed as I struggle not to thrust upward into her throat. Her tongue drags against the underside of my cock as she bobs her head, her hand moving up and down along my shaft.

I need it harder. Faster.

I reach down and touch her hand. She pauses in her movements, as if waiting for my instruction. I tighten my fist around hers and move her the way I need her to move. She seems to understand, and readily grips me harder, moving her hand faster as her sweet lips pucker around the tip of my cock.

I am close. I whisper the warning to her through gritted teeth, and she doubles her efforts, fucking me with her tongue and her lips and her throat until I cum with a deep groan, thrusting despite myself as I release into her mouth.

She swallows my seed as quickly as it spurts out of me, her hand still moving on me until she feels me relax. Then she stands slowly, wiping her mouth with a look of satisfaction on her face.

“Did you like that?” she asks.

I only moan in response.

She lets out a small laugh, more light-hearted than I have heard from her in a while. I stare at her for a moment as she stares back.

“Why did you do that, Jayla?” I ask. My voice is raspy with the aftermath of my orgasm.

Jayla’s eyes cloud for a moment before she looks away with a shrug. “I thought you would like it,” she says tightly.

“I do not think I have ever liked anything more, save pushing into your cunt,” I tell her.

She looks back at me quickly, scanning my expression as if looking for a sign that I am lying to her. “Really?” she asks. “I thought... I did think you would like it. But now I’m feeling a little self-conscious.”

“Why would you feel self-conscious?” I ask quietly.

She makes a frustrated sound in the back of her throat and covers her face in her hands. “Look, I don’t want to live in the past. But I’m just remembering the way you’ve been after we’ve... done stuff... before.”

“Ah,” I say. “You are worried I will have regrets.”

“Well you’ve done it before,” she points out.

“Because I felt too close to you, Jayla,” I tell her. “Because in the aftermath of bliss, all I could think about was you doing that with someone else. You being with someone else. And it killed me.”

“So you decided to self-fulfill it by forcing me into someone else’s arms?”

My jaw clenches. “Did I?” I ask. My heart pounds fast as I wait for her answer. Of course I cannot fault her if she chose someone else; it would have been my own fault. But the idea of her climbing into bed with someone else makes me wild with jealousy.

“No,” she says sadly. “There’s never been anyone for me but you. Not since I first saw you.”

“Come here,” I tell her, holding out my arms. She hesitates for a moment and then comes closer, moving down as if to hug me. “Ze, get into the bed with me,” I tell her. “Lie down with me.”

“I’ll hurt you,” she protests. “You’re still recovering...”

“Nothing could help me recover faster than your body next to mine,” I tell her. “Please.”

She glows a little bit at that, and I vow to myself that I will spend every day for the rest of time reminding her of her beauty, her intelligence, and her importance in my life. I will never let her wonder for a moment how I am feeling about her. As far as penance goes, it is far from fair; I deserve a far worse punishment than watching her cheeks turn rosy under the weight of my words.

But I am a selfish bastard, and I will take it.

Jayla feels warm in my arms. She lies on her side facing me, her hand resting on my chest. She drops her head onto my shoulder and closes her eyes, moving a little closer as she hums happily. “This is nice,” she whispers.

"It is," I agree. I loop my arms around her and pull her even more snugly into the bed. I drift into the most contented sleep of my life.

I wake up to the sound of a throat clearing. Jayla stiffens against me, and then starts to move away. I tighten my hold on her to keep her in place.

"This will not help you recover, idiot," the Doc says as he looks over something on the monitors beside the bed.

"It will if I say it will," I reply.

"So you're a doctor now?" the Doc asks.

"How's Nicky?" Jayla chirps, changing the subject before I can respond.

The Doc's facial expression softens ever so slightly at her question. "She is fine," he says. "No thanks to either of you."

"I'm so sorry she got hurt," Jayla says. She sits up and slips out of the bed, coming around to stand in front of the Doc. He looks surprised by her decision, and glances over at me as if asking what he should expect her to do.

I shrug. I have no idea what she has planned.

And then she reaches out and grabs his hands. I growl low in my throat, but Jayla just gives me a sideways glance of annoyance before looking back at the Doc. "You know she cares for you, right?" Jayla says.

"We have been through a lot together," the Doc says. "We care for each other as colleagues and friends."

"Hmm," Jayla says.

"What does 'hmm' mean?" the Doc asks.

"Oh nothing, just thinking of something else," Jayla says.

The Doc makes a 'humph' noise and leaves the room without a backward glance. Jayla turns to look at me with an amused expression on her face. "If the two of them aren't together before we leave this place, I'll be shocked," she says.

I smile at her. "Is that something you are thinking about? Leaving here?"

Jayla bites her lip. "I mean, we came so I could get surgery. Looks like we might have some time to spend here while you recover but after that..."

"After that, maybe we can return to Beshtast?" I ask hopefully.

"I'd like that," Jayla says shyly. "But no rush. I want to make sure you're completely healed before we go."

It is now my turn to make a 'humph' noise. I do not care about being fully healed. In fact, the more I think about everything that has happened, especially with the Tragers, the more I do not want to stay here any longer than we have to.

When the Doc returns to check on me a few hours later, I ask him for his advice.

"Well, you could probably use a couple days' rest," he says. "You don't want to run the risk of getting yourself marooned somewhere when you might still not be of much use. But after that, I would feel all right with sending you off. You can take the Trager warship. Nicky has confirmed it works fine."

I tell Jayla this when she comes back to share an evening meal with me. Her eyes widen in surprise. "Just a couple days?" she asks. "That seems fast."

"Xalkes heal quickly," I remind her.

"Ah. Well... ok then," she bites into her food and chews thoughtfully. I can see the wrinkles starting in her brow.

"Are you worried? About going back to Beshtast?"

Jayla smiles. "Not really," she says. "Actually, I'm excited about it. You and me together... and I like Beshtast. I've loved living there all these years. The only thing that made me sad was..."

"Me," I finish for her.

"Well, yes. But now that's all done with."

"I will spend the rest of my life making you happy, Jayla," I tell her. "I will make sure you know that you are loved every day."

Jayla smiles tenderly and reaches out to take my hand. "I believe you. Mostly, it's hard to imagine leaving Nicky behind with no one for company but the Doc."

"I thought you said they enjoyed each other."

"They do, in a way," Jayla says, her nose wrinkling. "I guess I just don't understand it, you know?"

I chuckle at that. "There is someone out there for everyone," I say. "Just as you were out there for me."

Chapter Twenty-three - Jayla



Two days pass so fast, it feels as if I don't even blink. Between hovering over Frey and helping the Doc and Nicky with stuff that can use three sets of hands, I barely sleep. I'm so behind on packing that the morning we're scheduled to leave, I have a full-blown panic attack.

The Doc gives me a cloth and tells me to breathe into it. "It will calm you," he says.

I grab the cloth and lift it to my nose. It smells fragrant and comforting. I take two deep breaths before the Doc pulls the cloth away from me.

"Better?" he asks.

"Better," I sigh. "Thank you. For everything."

"It's my job," he says gruffly.

"Will you two be ok here without my help? Seriously? I know Nicky is still healing..."

"We will be fine," the Doc says, waving his hand in the air to dismiss my concerns. "We have always been fine before."

I stop moving and stand in front of him with my hands on my hips, practically forcing him to look into my eyes. "You know, you should tell her how you feel, right?"

The Doc's eyes narrow. "I know nothing of the kind," he snaps. "She and I are always at odds. You do not fight with a person you have...those feelings... for."

I raise an eyebrow. "So you don't care about her then? Because from what I saw..." I trail off, but the implication is apparently clear enough to the Doc, because he offers me a blistering glare.

At that moment, Frey wanders past us. He's been taking short walks up and down the station for the last 24 hours, and he's starting to move more like himself. I'm relieved every time I see it, though I still watch for signs of stiffness or pain.

“Frey, tell your female to mind her own business,” the Doc says.

He shakes his head at the Doc’s words, but before he can comment, I laugh. “He knows better than that,” I say. “Don’t you, Frey?”

He smiles at me affectionately. “I do,” he says. “Especially since I want to avoid turning into that kind of couple.”

“And what kind of couple is that?” the Doc growls.

“A couple who chooses to fight about things instead of... doing what they actually want to do.”

“And what do you think that is, exactly?” the Doc asks, looking back and forth between us with a glint of anger in his eyes.

“Well, I think you want to sleep with her,” I say. “But more than that, I think you want to be with her.”

“I want nothing of the kind,” the Doc says gruffly. “Besides...” He hesitates and then looks up and down the hall as if concerned that Nicky might appear.

“Besides...?” I prompt.

“If she wanted me, she would have told me. Nicky does not lie. And she does not hide the truth.”

“Maybe that’s the case most of the time, but I’m not sure it’s true this time.”

“What makes you say that?” the Doc asks.

“Just that I talked to her about you just like I’m talking to you about her,” I tell him.

The Doc looks at me sharply. “And?” he prompts.

“And I’m not going to tell you what she told me or didn’t tell me, because that would be breaking her confidence. But I think you should talk to her,” I reply. “I promise, I like you both. Frey and I both owe you our lives. I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

The Doc frowns for a moment and then nods, striding off down the corridor without another word. I turn to look at Frey and smile. “I think we did good there, don’t you?”

“I do,” he says. “Though I wish someone could have done the same for

us ages ago.”

I can feel my smile fading a little. “Some people did. They talked to me, anyway. But...”

“But when you talked to me, I rejected you. I know.” He moves toward me solemnly and places his hands on my hips, pulling me close. “I am so sorry for wasting so much of the time we might have shared together.”

I sigh. As much as I want to lean into his arms and just let him hold me, I take a step back to look up at his face. “Is this too much?” I ask. “Will we ever be able to get past it and enjoy each other?”

He stares at me for a moment. “Jayla, my love,” he says hoarsely. “I do not know what happens next. I only know that I want it to be you and me together. For whatever comes.”

The tension in my belly releases almost instantly. “I think that sounds pretty great.”

The ship is packed and we’ve said our goodbyes. The door has been open to the space station for a few days, but I still wrinkle my nose at the smell when I step aboard. Eau de Trager will never be a favorite of mine.

I stand on one side of the airlock and Nicky stands on the other. Frey is on the bridge of our little ship, prepping for take off.

“I’ll come back and visit,” I promise Nicky for the twentieth time.

“I know you will,” she says.

“And maybe when I come back, things will be different here?” I hint.

Nicky laughs and shakes her head. “You never give up, do you?”

“Not when I think there’s a reason to keep going. Thanks for the dresses by the way. I love them.” I swish the fabric of my new green dress back and forth against my hips. I feel beautiful for the first time in ages.

“No problem at all,” Nicky says. “And thanks for trading. I was getting sick of wearing the same stuff week after week.”

“You could go to Pallasan or something,” I say. “Get some new stuff.”

“Yeah,” Nicky says, “but there’s always a lot to do here. It seems extravagant to take a shopping trip that requires a spaceship, you know? Still, it’s nice to have some new things.”

“Some things that you might... want to wear for someone?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows.

Nicky rolls her eyes. “You’re like a dog with a bone, you know that, right?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Seems to me like one of you needs to take the first step. Might as well be you.”

Nicky’s brow furrows as if she’s feeling vulnerable, but she smooths it out and smiles at me. “I know, I know, I know. Thanks for caring, friend.”

An alarm sounds, and Frey’s voice comes over the intercom. “Jayla, please confirm that you are aboard.”

“Confirmed,” I call out. “See you soon, Nicky.”

“See you,” Nicky replies with a wobbly smile.

Moments later, the door of the ship starts to close. Nicky and I wave at each other until it closes all the way. I can hear the screeching of metal as our ship detaches from the station. I reach forward and touch the cool metal of the door, silently giving my thanks to the two people on the other side. Without them, I’d be dead or dying, alone somewhere in the galaxy. They gave me a life.

And I intend to use it.

I spin on my heel and turn back toward the bridge. This warship isn’t very big, and it doesn’t take long for me to be standing behind Frey’s giant form, watching as he types instructions into a computer.

“All good?” I ask. “Nicky told me that even Trager ships are programmed in Pan-Un.”

“*Tak*, everything is in Pan-Un, and the ship seems to work fine, now that we are away from the station. They should really work on those dockings. They are truly terrible. I am sure I caused damage when I pulled away.”

“I think the Doc likes them that way. He told me that it stops people from coming aboard unless they really have to.”

Frey snorts and spins his chair around to face me. His eyes flick down over my green gown.

“Do you like it?” I ask, touching the fabric gently. “Nicky gave it to me.”

“*Tak*, I like it,” Frey says tightly. His eyes are so bright they almost burn.

I blush despite myself. “I had to pair it with my boots, though. Nicky didn’t have any less practical shoes, and it didn’t seem like the best idea to be travelling in heels, anyway.”

Frey grunts, his eyes still raking up and down my body as if he’s touching me. I clear my throat and crane my neck to see the computer monitor behind him. “Are we...”

“On a navigational track bound for Beshtast,” Frey says without looking away from me. “Nicky gave this to you?”

“She did,” I say with a shy smile. “Along with a few others. We traded, since we were both sick of our clothes, and it’s not exactly easy to go shopping for the stuff we like. Someone should really start a clothing company for human women on Beshtast, don’t you think?”

He just grunts in response, his eyes glittering as he watches me.

I clear my throat, trying to cover up the loud beating of my heart. I wish he would stop looking at me like that. Ok, that’s a lie; I never want him to stop looking at me like that. “So, um, how long until we reach the planet?”

Frey stares at me for another moment before realizing I’ve asked him a question. “What was that?” he asks vaguely.

“I asked how long until we reach Beshtast,” I repeat with a smile.

“Not long. A few days, I expect. The gravitational pull of a couple planets should help us to speed the journey. Might even be just one day, if we do it right.”

“Hmm,” I reply.

“What does that mean, ‘hmm’?” Frey asks, his eyes snapping as he watches me.

“I don’t know, just that maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing if we had a couple days on our own,” I say with a shrug.

Frey's expression flares with desire and he steps toward me. I back away, unable to keep the smile off my face. "Is the ship on autopilot, or—?"

"It is," he growls. "But even if it were not, it would be worth the risk."

With a little scream, I turn and run off the bridge toward the room Nicky set up for me. I can hear him behind me, pursuing. I can feel my body throbbing, my panties getting wet beneath my dress as I make it through the doorway.

Frey grabs me from behind and hauls me back against him. I can feel his hardened cock against my back, and I shiver with anticipation. We've had sex before; but never like this. Never when we were really together. My whole body is trembling with anticipation.

Chapter Twenty-four - Frey



My blood is pumping hard through my veins. The little gasps of her body pressed against mine go straight to my cock, and I thrust my hips forward, letting her know I am here; I am ready for her.

“Frey,” she says in a dreamy voice. “What do you want me to do?”

I groan. She likes it when I take control; I learned that on the way to Sothach. I am about to give her everything she might desire.

“Get on the bed,” I instruct.

She looks over her shoulder at me, her eyelids heavy with passion at my terse voice. She wiggles her hips as she moves forward to sit on the bed. As her ass presses down into the soft mattress, she looks up at me, her tongue wetting her lips, her cheeks reddening with arousal.

Without breaking eye contact, I lower myself before her, kneeling on the floor. I put my hands on her bare knees and stroke the skin there with the pads of my thumbs. “Spread your legs, *colarche*,” I tell her, my voice coming out in a low rasp.

Her breath catches and she hesitates, as if unsure. My grip on her knees tightens. “Do as I say,” I command her, lacing my voice with dominance in the way I know she likes. She shivers at the rumbling tone of my voice and slowly moves her knees apart.

I slide my hands up the inside of her thighs, glancing up at her to watch her reaction. Her lips are parted, her breath coming in short pants as she watches me. My fingers reach the thin piece of fabric that separates me from her cunt. I caress her gently through the soft cloth, biting back a groan as I feel how wet she already is.

Then, though it kills me a little, I move my hands away and lean back on my heels, staring up at her. She whimpers, her hips shifting on the bed as she looks at me, unsure of what I want her to do.

“Take them off,” I rasp.

She blinks. “Take... take what off?”

“Your panties. Now.”

She hesitates, biting her lip.

I let out a low growl. "Jayla."

She bites her lip even harder as she lifts the hem of her dress. Lying back for a moment, she lifts her hips and shimmies out of the panties, pulling them down to her ankles. Only then does she realize she still has her boots on, and she lets out a nervous laugh as she kicks them off, clearing the way to remove her underwear. She peels off her socks as well, leaving her feet bare as they dangle above the floor.

Task completed, she pulls the green dress down over her knees again, and sits in front of me primly.

"Did I say you could close your legs again, *colarche*?" I ask.

"Oh," she says, her cheeks reddening. "Um, no. You-you didn't." She opens them again slightly, and I catch a glimpse of her pussy.

The animal in me takes over. My hands move like lightning, pushing her legs apart, and her dress up to her waist. I lean forward and press kisses to her knees and her inner thighs. I can hear her quiet gasps, and the occasional murmur of my name on her lips. It drives me forward. I flick my tongue out and run it along her slit.

She cries out in surprise, and jumps as if she intends to get away. That will not be happening. I grip her legs tightly, my fingers sinking into her flesh as my tongue probes her core, flicking in and out of her sweetness.

"Goddess, your taste," I groan against her. "I will dream of this for the rest of my days."

"Frey," she whispers, her hand coming down to touch my hair gently. "God, Frey."

The sound of my name is enough to banish any control I might have had. I bury my face in her cunt, drinking deeply of her nectar. She cries out loudly, raising her lips to meet my tongue as I push and tease, flicking and sucking. I make my way to her clit and give it the attention it deserves. One of my hands moves up from her leg and I press a finger into her tight entrance, delighting in how soaked she is.

"So wet for me, beautiful," I murmur against her clit before licking her roughly. "So ready for my cock."

At my words, she gives a loud cry and shudders against me. A wave of

sweetness flows over my fingers as she tightens, lifting her hips as she comes hard.

I suck and lick through her orgasm, making sure to draw as much of it from her body as I can. She deserves this; she deserves every moment of pleasure I can give her in this life. And I will spend the rest of my days making her feel it.

The vow brings with it a rush of emotion, and I double my efforts, intent on making her scream my name again. She tries to escape me, shifting her hips, but I wrap my hands around her waist and pin her down, laving her clit with my tongue until I feel her getting close again.

"Frey please," she moans. "Please, I need... I need..."

"Tell me what you need, sweetness," I rumble. "Tell me so I can give it to you."

"I want... I want you inside me," she says.

I stop and glance up at her, looking deep into her eyes as I get to my feet and remove my clothes. She props herself up on her elbows and watches me, her eyes dark with passion. She has forgotten all her inhibitions now, and her legs are spread wide, her skirts still hitched up above her thighs.

I don't take the time to take off my shirt. I just lower my trousers and kick them away before striding toward her, pumping my cock in my hand.

"Do you see what you do to me, Jayla?" I ask in a harsh, guttural voice. "Do you see it?"

Her eyes drop to my cock and she watches me touch myself for a moment. Then she sits up and reaches for me, taking my length in her fist and moving it up and down. "I see," she says in a whispered voice. "I see and I feel. Poor, poor warrior. What can I do to help you?"

I let my head fall back as she touches me, enjoying the sensation of her soft hand against my flesh. My eyes are closed, enjoying the sensation, so I am shocked when I feel her mouth close over the tip of me. I snap my head forward and stare down at her, only to find her eyes looking up at me, her expression tender and sweet as she sucks my dick.

"*Colarche*," I say harshly, pressing my hips forward into her mouth.

“Oh, Goddess, your tongue.”

She has flicked her tongue over the tip of me, and then run it along the base of my shaft. Her mouth is hot and wet and she puckers her lips around me, taking me deep. We stare at each other, both of us lost in each other's eyes. Her taste still lingers on my tongue, as I know mine will linger on hers.

She lets out a low hum, and the vibration travels over my cock.

Suddenly I cannot wait any longer.



I take Frey deep into my throat. My body is throbbing with sensation. I love it when he uses that voice to order me around; I love it more now that I know this won't be the only time. We can do this again and again. We're together; we're going to be together.

As I pump my hand over his shaft, shaping my lips over him, I think about the way it felt to have his fingers slide inside me while his tongue flicked against my most sensitive cluster of nerves. Fuck, it was magic.

I turn my gaze up to meet Frey's eyes, sucking with everything I have, pumping his shaft with my hand. I see the moment everything changes for him. His eyes go from aroused to determined, flaring with something dark and deeply erotic.

Without warning, he pulls himself out of my mouth and grabs me by the shoulders, pushing me back on the bed. His body covers mine in an instant, and he presses his cock against my core.

"*Colarche*," he grits out. "Tell me you want this as badly as I do."

"I want it more," I say. Then I cry out as he thrusts forward, burying himself to the hilt in a single push.

"Not possible," he growls. Then he pushes his hips forward, moving even deeper inside of me. I sob his name as he withdraws and then thrusts forward again, his body alive inside of mine. He grabs hold of my breast through the fabric of my dress, swiping at my nipple desperately as he fucks me. My whole body feels like it's on fire. When he leans down to kiss me, I can taste myself on his lips; on his tongue.

Without warning, I feel another orgasm racing forward. As if he can sense it, Frey's hand moves down from my breast to my clit and he circles it carefully as he rams himself inside of me. He's moving faster and faster now. I can tell by the way his breath has changed that he's close.

I am too.

"Look at me, *colarche*," he says as he moves. "Look into my eyes. This is forever, do you understand?"

I stare up at him and smile. “Forever,” I say.

And we go over the edge together.

The End.

Epilogue - Nicky



I watch the door slide closed, and listen as Jayla and Frey's ship disengages from the station. I touch my shoulder and groan as I lean against the wall. I've been hiding it as well as I can, but my wound hurts like a bitch.

I know I should go lie down, but if the Doc sees me resting, he'll think I can't do my job here anymore. And then maybe I'll have to leave. The idea hurts more than my shoulder.

I turn away from the doorway, intending to return to my work, but I stop short when I see the Doc staring at me.

"Your arm hurts, doesn't it?" he says gruffly.

"Well yes, I was shot, but I'm fine," I say. "Frey was shot too, and he's —"

"He's a Xalke. He'll recover faster than you." The Doc steps toward me, and my heart starts to pound. I can see him reading my aura; the F'Reit are well-known for their ability to read the emotions of certain species. Humans are among them, of course. Lucky me.

"I can see your pain, Nicolina," the Doc says. "Why haven't I seen it before? Is it new?"

I want to shrug but I stop myself, knowing it will cause me pain. "It's been up and down," I say casually. "I'm fine most of the time. I don't like those pain pills; they make me loopy. So when things get bad, I avoid you."

"You know I could have found a painkiller that worked without making you dizzy, if you had come to me. But of course, you're so stubborn, you have to hide your pain from a damned doctor."

"I haven't been hiding anything from you," I say snappishly. "I'm sorry that I'm not a puddle of tears all the time about an injury that couldn't be helped."

"It could have been helped, if you had just stayed out of harm's way, damn it!" the Doc roars.

I jump in surprise at the tenor of his voice. The Doc has yelled at me

many times. He swears and insults me, curses under his breath, glares, growls, and generally has no problem expressing his frustration with me. But this feels different. There's something new in his voice.

"Doc, were you... worried about me?" I ask softly, searching his eyes.

The Doc stares at me, stunned. "Of course not," he says quickly. "But I'm a doctor, and it is my job to take care of you as long as you are injured. Plus it means I have to do all the work around here while we wait for you to heal."

I feel my face fall, and I try to cover it up. I shouldn't be disappointed. Jayla got into my head with all this 'he cares about you' stuff. "Well there's no reason I can't do my job," I say, jutting my chin out. "Glad you're not worried, because I'm fine."

The Doc sighs as if I'm completely exhausting and illogical. "Stupid human. You can't do your job right now. Look at you. You're about to fall over, you're so weak. You need to rest your body so you don't get worse. A little injury like this one, and you could just fall over and die."

"I mean, I was shot. I wouldn't call that a 'little' injury," I say, stiffening.

"Just look at how quickly Frey recovered," the Doc counters. "Meanwhile you are still in extreme pain."

"Well, if you're so worried that I'll die, maybe I should have left with Frey and Jayla. They didn't seem to mind having me around."

"Maybe you should have," the Doc replies gruffly.

I press my lips together. Anger, hurt, and pain are swirling through me. I know he can fucking see it in my damned aura, too. With a sniff, I start to walk around him. "I'll hail them, and ask them to turn back and pick me up, then."

"Don't be ridiculous," he says. "They won't want to turn back around and pick you up."

I spin around, my mouth curled in a snarl. "They'll do it because they care about me. They like me. They're my friends. I don't know why I thought you were my friend, too. Obviously I was wrong."

I turn to go again, but the Doc grabs hold of my uninjured arm. I can't remember the last time he touched me except to treat me. I freeze,

letting him turn me back toward him. He pulls me close, keeping hold of my arm. I tilt my head back to look up at him, trying to control the rapid beating of my heart.

“Nicky,” he says gruffly. “You are my friend. You know that.”

“Do I?” I whisper. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell.” Against my will, my eyes drop from his eyes to his lips. I can feel the throbbing desire growing inside me.

“Nicolina,” the Doc says in a low voice. It sounds more like a warning than anything else.

I raise my eyes to his again. “What?” I ask softly.

“You must stop this,” he says. “You do not know what you tempt.”

“Don’t I?” I ask.

Jayla’s words come back to me: *Seems to me like one of you needs to take the first step. Might as well be you.*

I stare into his eyes, those beautiful gray eyes that have called to me day after day for years... and then, I decide. Fuck it. I lean forward and lift myself onto my tip-toes to press a small kiss against his lips. I rock back on my heels again, smiling smugly at the shocked look on his face. I start to move backward, intending to leave him to think about the kiss, but his grip on my arm tightens.

“You call that a kiss?” he asks hoarsely.

I let out a little laugh of surprise, but before I can respond, he has pulled me close again. His lips touch mine, his tongue sliding out and running over my bottom lip. I gasp, and he takes advantage, moving into my mouth as he moves his arm down to my ass and palms me. His mouth slants over mine again and again, as if he can’t stop tasting me.

It’s my first real kiss. As I recover from my surprise, I touch my tongue against his tentatively. He growls and grips me tighter, still careful of my injury.

Finally, he breaks the kiss and presses his forehead against mine, both of us breathing heavily.

“That’s a kiss,” he says finally. He releases me, making sure I’m steady on my feet before he turns and strides away, as if he’s completely

unaffected.

I raise my hand to my mouth, running my fingertips over my swollen bottom lip. Damn. My whole body is on fire, wanting him. Needing him.

Before my heartbeat can calm down, I hear the Doc's voice over the intercom. "Are you going to stand there all day, or are we going to get back to work?"

I nod shakily and start toward my post, my head full of questions. The one that keeps repeating again and again is also the one that worries me most: What the hell do I do now?

Nicky and the Doc will return in...

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Author's Note

Hullo, dear readers! Thank you so much for reading *An Impossible Bride*. I would like to thank my wonderful alpha reader Kate Perry for her hard work, making sure my books make some kind of sense. And thank you to the team at the Romance Writers Support Group on Facebook, who always know how to make me laugh.

More books on the horizon, of course, so follow me if you don't already!

All my love,

-Juniper.

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